

C³ -シーキューブ-

海外の父親から宅配便で突然届いた、
超重い謎の黒い立方体。一体何なんだろう
と訝る夜知春亮は、なんだか厄介事の
気配を感じつつ、ソレを適当に放置した。

——その夜。目を覚ました春亮は
不審な物音に気付く。もしか泥棒……？
緊迫した空気の中、見つけた侵入者は、
月明かりに照らされた、幻想的な——

「全裸の煎餅泥棒女っ!？」

——なのだった……!

おかしい出会いから始まる、水瀬葉月
の新シリーズ登場!

-シーキューブ-
CubexCursedxCurious

水瀬葉月
Illustration せりがため

3 —シーキューブ— Cube×Curse×Curious



水瀬葉月

Illustration ゆんごうなだる

異音に気付いた春亮は、抜き足差し足泥棒気分
でその音の発生源へと近づいて、月明かりの中、
銀色に輝く髪を持つその少女と出会う。
そしてあんまりな事実に見たそのまんまを叫ぶ
のだった。

ある日突然、夜知家に超重い謎の黒い
立方体が届いた。
なんだか厄介事の気配を感じつつも、
箱を適当に放置したその夜――

「全裸の煎餅泥棒女っ!?!」

や ち はる あき
夜知春亮

家事が得意な枯れた高校
生。特異な体質を持つた
め、海外放蕩中の父親か
らいわくつきの物品を送
りつけられていたりする。

フィア

夜知家にいつのまにやら
存在し、台所に忍び込ん
で煎餅を貪り食っていた
少女。何やら複雑な事情
を抱えていて……!?

Scene02:追手襲来

「了解。作戦を開始。する」

マミーメーカー
ミイラ屋

マントと包帯を肌を隠すようにして身に着ける少女。その包帯の下にあるものは……？

「我々は呪われた道具の存在を赦しません。
その筆頭たるそれを——
《箱形の恐禍》を破壊致します」

ピーヴィー・パロライ

豪華なドレスを纏い、無骨な手甲で両腕を覆う奇妙な女。一体<何>を破壊するとか——!?

Scene03:学校強襲!?

「ふふふ。来てやったぞ、春亮」

うえの さりか
上野錐霞

成績優秀・冷静沈着な委員長・オブ・委員長。

「一緒に住んでいる……?」
学級委員長として、いくつか確認せねば
ならないことができたな……!」

「ああもうまったく、
どこに文句を言ってもよいやら……!」

むら まき
村正このは

大変発育のよろしい眼鏡っ娘。夜知家の離れに住んでいて、対外的には春亮の従姉妹という設定。

「あーっ、ぶーん、ぶーん」

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水瀬葉月

Illustration さそりがため

I. A tool changes its quality in a negative way if it continues to receive negative thoughts.

II. A tool that receives negative thoughts often affects the owner and the people around it.

III. In exchange for the negative effect it brings upon the people around it, it may show a mysterious charm and function.

IV. At the end of receiving all the negative thoughts and curses from humans, it will obtain human qualities.

Prologue

A black cube.

It was the only way to describe it when you looked at it. One side was about 1 meter long, and there was no hint as to the object's use.

Yachi Haruaki stared at it with an obvious look of disbelief on his face.

"Excuse me, sir, could I have your signature?"

"Oh, yes, sure."

Haruaki checked the receipt. It was written in English since it was sent from abroad, but the name written for the sender was just as he expected.

Another one of THOSE, you stupid old man?! Haruaki groaned silently to himself.

"Thank you, sir! Phew, I've had a hard time carrying this. It was so heavy! Well, may I ask what this thing is, sir?"

"Er, you see, my father loves to collect antique objects, so he sends some that he bought while abroad every once in a while... Hmmm... I also wonder what this is!"

Haruaki tried to evade the question. It was no lie though. It was just that he wasn't sure how weird this particular object that his father had sent to him this time was. Of course, he didn't bother explaining that to the delivery man.

After the delivery man had driven away, Haruaki looked down again at the strange box lying in front of his gate.

"What is this, really? Well, it was my old man who sent it, so it's got to be something troublesome for sure."

The important question was to what degree will it be troubling? Haruaki cautiously touched the cube, feeling the cold sensation of the steel. It had no lid, so he supposed that it was a boxed-shaped "something", rather than a box to put "something" in. He examined the surface closely and noticed that there were numerous lines and curves that hinted a joint seam.

"Is it some kind of puzzle box? Maybe it has to undergo a certain process to activate or something...? Hmmm, maybe I'm just thinking too much. I

suppose these kind of things are the ones that don't have a specific use, now that I think about it. I've made up my mind! It's nothing important, I'm sure. My peaceful life will go on just as it was..."

Haruaki told himself this as he played with the seams. He thought he heard a surprised wail. He stopped moving and closed his eyes. After he calmed down he told himself,

"...That was an auditory hallucination."

While he was trying to convince himself, the cube let out a sound of grazing steel, and a part of its surface moved. Haruaki peeked at the space visible from the part of the cube that looked like a popped-out CD tray. He saw metal parts with different shapes that looked like cogs entangled inside. He tried to trace them with his fingers, but all that did was to move them. Nothing had happened except for the low moan that he thought he heard.

"Oh, another auditory hallucination! That's it, uh-huh. Well, it's none of my business anyway! Since it has nothing to do with me, the best thing to do is to leave it alone!"

For the moment, he decided not to think about it. However, it would be bad if he left the cube at the front of his gate, so he brought it to the room where the other objects that his father sent were being stored.

"Oh... God...! It's so damn heavy!"

He started to walk toward the main building of his house. On his way, he thought he heard a dissatisfied snort but, of course, he decided it was another one of those auditory hallucinations.

Haruaki woke up inside his 6-tatami^[1] Japanese room. He hurriedly checked the clock and saw that it was already past 7:00 PM. It was already dark outside the window. He only planned to take a nap after carrying the black cube to the storage room, but ended up sleeping until now. Maybe it was because he wasn't able to sleep well last night.

Oh hell, my stomach's already complaining in hunger, but I still haven't made anything to eat...

He did have a housemate living in a separate building, but he was usually alone, so it was unlikely that he'd find a cooked meal. Besides, the

package that his father sent came right after he came home from school, so he hadn't had the chance to prepare something to eat. Haruaki got out of the bed and was thinking about the chores he was going to do when he heard faint sounds. The sound of someone's footsteps, the sound of someone scavenging inside the cabinet, and finally, an unknown crunching sound.

Could it be... Konoha?

Haruaki looked out the window and checked the second floor of the other building. There were two windows and one of them had lights on. That meant that his housemate was there.



His whole body tensed. This traditional Japanese house was old and wide. It was an excellent prey for burglars. Haruaki opened the sliding door and walked silently down the hallway. The sound came from the kitchen. He held his breath and silently walked there, feeling like a burglar himself.

The moonlight illuminated a small figure crouching in front of the cabinet. It also reflected long silver hair. Observing its shadow, Haruaki decided that the figure was female. Her hand was alternating from her mouth to the plastic bag she was holding. The unknown crunching sound was coming from there. His calm observation ended when he realized the amazing view in front of him. Without a thought, he pointed his finger at the female figure and shouted,

"A naked rice cracker thief?!"

"Huh?"

The girl stared back at Haruaki. She had long silver hair and fair white skin, with a slender body and a beautiful face. It was shrouded with grace and strong will, with contradicting qualities playing in her expression like trick art. A fragment of a rice cracker in her mouth fell as she also pointed her finger towards Haruaki and shouted,

"Wha..?! Hey! You're that impudent man from earlier!"

The girl looked down at her body and a shade of red spread across her face.

"Don't tell me you're planning to play with my body again?! What a shameless man!"

She knelt down and started to throw every object that was within her grasp: a tray, a wooden plate, a teapot, among other things. She did it with great control. Haruaki slipped on the object that he had accidentally stepped on while trying to parry the flying projectiles. Objects started to pile above him.

"Ouch! H-hold on for a second! Ow! If you come near me, I'll..."

The girl crossed her arms in front of her modest breasts, her hands still holding the round-shaped rice crackers. Haruaki lost his voice as he froze up upon seeing the unreadable expression on her face. The girl tensed up for a moment and shouted at him,

"...I, I'll put a curse on you!"

Haruaki understood from the words she said that SHE was the box that he received this afternoon. Tension left his shoulders and he dropped them as he thought,

I knew it. That stupid old man... He did it again.

He sent another Cursed Tool again!

Chapter 1 - The Unknown One Who Went to Bed / "Night of Rubik's Cube"

Part 1

"...What is this? Custard pudding?"

The girl said as she poked the yellowish-white object in front of her with a sulky expression.

"Have a taste and you'll know."

"Hmmm... hm?! T-this...."

She guided the spoon into her mouth, then froze up.

"It's not sweet! This is a fake! What malicious food... When something has a soft foundation and covered with black sauce, it just has to be a pudding!"

"Don't call the food malicious. It's simply tofu, coagulated soybean juice. You don't like it?"

Haruaki sat just opposite of the girl after removing the apron he had on. The girl's ill temper was obvious as she chewed the chilled tofu. She was now wearing a borrowed shirt and hot pants.

"Hmph, it's not bad. It's inferior to the crunchy snack I was munching earlier, though."

"Poor tofu, being compared to a rice-cracker."

"So, that was called a rice-cracker. Now, that one had a unique food texture. It was sweet but spicy at the same time, and that feeling while crunching at it... h-huh? Why are you looking at me?"

Haruaki simply answered that it was nothing, and looked away from the face that said she was caught off-guard. He started eating too. Haruaki thought that this situation was just like what the old sayings said: To eat while you can, since you can't fight a war on an empty stomach. The girl who sat opposite of him unnecessarily checked that the food in front of her was a fish, looking at the broiled mackerel pike as if she had never seen one before. After her thorough observation, she placed down the spoon

and fork she was holding. Haruaki imagined what she was going to do and initiated a warning before the girl's bare hands got the mackerel.

"Wait. You'll have to go over my dead body first before you can eat something with bare hands in front of me."

Haruaki reached for the mackerel plate to prevent her hands from grasping it, but for some reason the girl suddenly backed off the tatami space she was sitting on.

"Hey wait. I just misunderstood things earlier. I was a little confused at first, but I'm alright now. I even lent you those clothes, didn't I?"

"I-I'm not sure.... I mean, you recently played with THAT part of my body earlier in front of the gate..."

"But I didn't know I was touching THAT part of your body. Oh hell, I'm sorry anyway. Just forgive me already, 'kay?"

Haruaki asked her a cliched apology while he started on the mackerel pike with his chopsticks.

"Watch me, I'll show you how to dismantle this mackerel. Just do it first like this, then grab its head, and then pull it away with those nasty fishbones. It's easy, isn't it?"

The girl watched with interest for a while, but she quickly recovered her wary face. After a few seconds, she snorted with an ill temper as she sat back in front of the table.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"...I'm called Fear."

Fear quickly shut her mouth, as if she were surprised that she'd told him her name.

"Fear, is it?"

"Well, yes. It's none of your business though... you can just call me whatever you want."

"Unfortunately, you're part of my business now. You just became my top priority. In fact, the way you became my top priority was almost foul play. So, what are you anyway? What kind of box are you?"

"Er..."

"Er?"

Without warning, she raised her eyebrows in outrage and started making holes in the broiled mackerel, just after Haruaki raised a question mark at her answer.

"Shut up! It's none of your business, you fool!"

"Whoa! What kind of cursing was that?! I haven't heard them for a while. Anyway, are you a brat, having an outburst like that?!"

"W-Why you?!"

"I haven't heard that for a while too... wha, hey! Stop attacking that mackerel and close your mouth!"

"Digging up a lady's past like that! You should learn some respect, you shameless brat!"

Haruaki thought that he didn't want to hear that from HER. But being the sensible one, he decided to give up.

"Whew.... Well, I won't push you if you don't want to tell me about your past. I know it's not exactly filled with happy memories."

It seemed that her temper had somewhat cooled down because of Haruaki's honest words. She was at a loss for words and turned her face down.

"I... hate that appearance. I wouldn't want to turn into that form unless it's absolutely necessary. Someone told me coming here would be easier with that form. So, I had no choice but to give up..."

"Who told you? My old man?"

"He said his name was Honatsu... Are you his son?"

"Yeah. And my name's Haruaki. How's my old man doing?"

"I don't know. He said that he still had something to do over there."

"As much of a free man as usual, I see. Geez, I'm tired of complaining about him though. As long as he keeps sending money for my living, I'll keep up with his game."

"I don't understand you two... I mean, you and your father. I thought an ordinary man wouldn't try to understand the likes of me."

"We've been receiving cursed tools like you since I was a kid. Usually, tools that we accept are those with a slight curse in it, but there are rare occasions where a tool who can assume human form like you comes here for help."

After a brief silence, Fear let out a sigh and placed down the fork she was holding. Her serious gaze pierced Haruaki as she looked up, her silver hair swaying slightly.

"I'm going to say something serious."

"...Go ahead."

"I... I was placed in some dark dungeon, thrown away long ago by my last owner. Yachi Honatsu came one day and found me. He tried to talk to me, and I told him my wish."

"A wish?"

Haruaki already had an idea what her wish was. But, cursed tools who came here with their own will were often the ones who needed to confirm the purpose of their existence by putting them into words. Knowing that, he chose to let her say it out loud from her own mouth.

The girl who was not human answered in a whisper, biting her lips softly,

"I want to free myself from my curse."

"How much do you know...? About the curse, and about tools like me?"

"Well, here's what I know; First, a tool changes its quality in a negative way if it continues to receive negative thoughts. Second, a tool that receives negative thoughts often affects the owner and the people around it. And third, in exchange with the negative effect it brings upon the people around it, it may show a mysterious charm and function..."

"Is that all?"

Haruaki narrowed his eyes and looked at Fear, who was speaking with her eyes looking down at the table.

"To add one more, I know that after receiving all the negative thoughts and curses from humans, an item would become... something that's in front of me right now."

Yes. A tool which received too much grudge from humans will earn a human quality----

Haruaki didn't know the specific details, but he knew that an item gains a personal thought which affects its essence as a tool. It was a result of receiving grudges from people over and over again. In the end, they'll possess their own mind, soul, and an ability to change forms with its own will.

"That's right. It started with a single grudge. I was made to harm people and because of it, I had received much hatred, grievances, and murderous intents. From those grudges, I was branded with the abominable curse of [driving my owner into insanity.]"

Haruaki noticed that the girl was gripping her hands tightly. He thought it was better not to ask more about her about concrete details of the tool that she was and about what she meant by driving her owner into insanity.

"My curse doesn't end there. The grudge I received gave me [human qualities] and my own will. To me, who was nothing but a tool in the beginning. Let me correct myself, I was not given those capabilities; I was forced to have those capabilities. Have you ever thought about how bad the affinity between a will and a curse was? I envy those tools which only have a slight curse. They won't realize by themselves that they were burdened by a curse. How fortunate it is to be blessed with ignorance!"

For a moment, she took a deep breath.

"I came here believing in Honatsu's words that I can free my curse here in this place. That's the reason why I came, but I was not told about the details of what I have to do. Tell me honestly---- Will I, will I be able to lift the curse from myself without affecting the people around me? Remember that Honatsu sent me to you, so that makes you my current owner. If you're just lying about here being a place to free one's self from a curse, you would be the first to receive the harmful effects that come with it."

Her eyes looked straight into his. But those eyes reflected undeniable fright and doubt. That was why Haruaki simply told her,

"Yes, you can."

"....Huh?"

"I said you can free yourself from your curse here. You see, I don't have strong spiritual sense or special ability like my father, but it seems that I have a unique body constitution which repels curses, which makes me unaffected by them. So, whatever your curse is, it doesn't work on me. Hahaha! Fear me, you violent little girl!"

"What the...?! Wait, you said that I could lift my curse here, but how?"

"I'm not sure about the details, but this place has been a very pure land for a long time, and the area where this house was built was the center of the pure energy that comes from the land. That's why just being here would fill you with positive energy. They say that this place is protected by some kind of force field, though the rate of cleansing is kinda slow. Just leaving the tools here would eventually lift the curse."

Haruaki remembered the woman who set the force field around the house. Her outfit caught many eyes, and she said that the force field would last for the next hundred years. He supposed that there won't be a chance to see her again, if the force field would really last that long.

"And, there's another way of lifting a curse. The mechanic is simple; if a curse comes from negative thoughts, you just have to receive positive thoughts by helping people around you. If you keep on receiving them, the curse will be neutralized eventually."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean to say that you have to vaguely perform acts that people will be thankful for, I suppose. You just have to live here and work as a part-timer or volunteer for public events... I think?"

"W-Wait, why was there a question mark in the end?"

Fear leaned forward, which sent the mackerel bits flying at Haruaki's face. He wondered if Fear did that on purpose.

"Well, it's not as if I've actually tried lifting a curse from myself. That was just what I've heard."

She puffed out her cheeks like a child, making a sullen expression.

"I can't believe it... I mean, I don't think that simply sleeping or working here would lift the curse. Besides, I doubt that my curse could be lifted in a leisurely phase..."

"You're right about going leisurely. Being able to assume human form would mean that many curses have been gathered in your body, so it would take years to free yourself. I don't know any other ways of lifting a curse, so maybe you'll just have to be patient about it."

"HMMMMMMMMMMMMMM, I still can't believe it."

"Don't worry so much about it. Even if you can't believe for----"

Ding dong. The door bell rung suddenly. Fear seemed to be frightened by it, so Haruaki told her that it was just a bell that said there was a visitor. He stood up and pointed at the table.

"The food will get cold, so eat it now. Especially the mackerel pike."

Part 2

"Good evening, Haruaki-kun."

A familiar smile greeted Haruaki as he opened the door. The smiling girl was wearing big round glasses like ones that you'd see in a manga. She had an apron around her well-endowed body and it was impressionable. The pot that she was holding reinforced the familial impression that shrouded her.

"Hey, Konoha. What is it?"

"I've made too much Nikujaga for myself, so I thought that I'd share some with you. It's a bit late already, so maybe you can have it for your breakfast tomorrow."

"That'll be a great help. I was just having my dinner right now... Oh yeah, it's just great that you came now. I have a favor to ask of you."

Konoha slanted her head in question. At that exact moment, Haruaki heard footsteps coming toward him.

"Hey, Haruaki. The food was kind of lacking in quantity. Isn't there any left? I would like to request for a rice cracker if there's still any left."

"You eat too fast!"

Needless to say, the person who came behind Haruaki was Fear.

"Um, Haruaki-kun? Who is that child?"

"Oh yeah, the favor I was going to ask you was about---"

An openly belligerent voice came from Fear as she broke into the conversation.

"Hey, you there! We've just met and you started calling me a child. How dare you speak to me like that, you unfortunate-looking woman!"

"Unfortunate-looking....?!"

Konoha was still smiling, but Haruaki sensed a dangerous aura coming out from her. Fear stood behind him with arms crossed, looking aggressively at Konoha. Haruaki thought he saw a lightning bolt run between Konoha and Fear.

"You two there. Why are you raising a hostile aura in front of my house?"

"I think you're just imagining things. I'm not angry, really. After all, they're just words of a CHILD."

At that moment, Haruaki felt a violent aura rising behind him. He sensed danger, so he quickly changed the topic.

"Er....Oh yeah! Hey Konoha, have you made anything else besides this? I mean, have you eaten your dinner? Why don't you eat here for a change? It's been a long time since the last time you ate here. It seems that I have to cook more food anyway."

"Well, if you say so... I think I will. Come to think of it, it has been a long time since the last time we ate together, Haruaki-kun."

"My cooking skills haven't improved though."

"It was great, so don't worry. I think I'm getting hungry just thinking about the dishes you make."

Konoha smiled and entered the house. Suddenly, an insulting snort came out from nowhere.

"Go ahead and eat. Hah, I think that being able to send all the nutrients you eat to your breasts is some kind of talent. I bet that your brain's very light."

Haruaki heard a clashing metal sound. Almost at the same time, he saw Konoha kneeling on the floor, catching the pot that almost fell from her hands. He looked at the floor and saw the handle of the pot, which was cut cleanly in half.

"...I think it's very sad when a person eats, but the nutrients don't go to their breasts... Oh, I was just talking to myself."

"W-Why you?!"

"Ahahaha-- I'll go ahead now."

Konoha let out a feigned laugh and went into the living room. Fear was staring at her back and was murmuring with hatred;

"What kind of character does that woman have...! Maybe I should curse her!"

"She's not usually like that. In fact, I have this feeling that you were the one who started the fight. Why are you being so hostile anyway?"

"It's none of your business! I just didn't like what she said when she saw me. That's enough reason for my hostility. Besides..."

A weird smile came from her angry expression.

"I just realized now that bullying that cow-tits woman is going to be fun. She'll see, I won't lose the next time...!"

Fear went back into the living room, letting out an evil snort as she walked to the living room.

Haruaki was worried about what could happen if he left those two together in the living room. But, he had to cook some food for Konoha and the hungry juvenile so he had no choice but to leave those two together in the living room. Haruaki made a plate full of an easy saute dish. Adding together some rice and miso soup for Konoha, he brought the food into the living room. He was greeted by a view of two girls throwing dry laughs at each other. Only God knows what happened while he was in the kitchen. He didn't even want to know.

"I only sauted what was left in the fridge. Is that okay for you?"

"No problem. I've made quite lot of Nikujaga anyway."

With a "Ta-da" sound effect, Konoha lifted the lid of the pot she brought with her. Inside the pot was a steaming soup of brownish broth and beef, letting out a fragrant smell of soy sauce. To put it simply, it looked delicious. If you'll take a good look at it, you'll notice that an excessive amount of beef was covering all the other ingredients like potatoes. The beef formed a great pile, just like a mountain sitting on a pot. If you ask me, it's more of a Niku-Niku-Nikujaga instead of a simple Nikujaga.

"Um, so, doesn't that look good?"

"It looks delicious, just as always."

Meat-demon Konoha's face lit up with a smile.

"I see, this definitely looks delicious. You can easily see that it was made by a gluttonous incarnate of appetite."

With that remark, the round lid that Konoha was holding fell on the table, cut into half. Without a word, she picked up the half circles and threw them behind her. After that, Konoha mouthed an Itadakimasu and started eating with a cheerful (that was how Haruaki interpreted Konoha's expression) face.

"I've no clue why or how this meal has turned into a tense atmosphere, but I guess I have to make an easy introduction at least. Konoha, our visitor here is called Fear. As you might guess, she was sent by my old man."

Konoha sent a look at Fear while she took loads of beef from the pot. Fear, on the other hand, completely ignored her.

"Fear, this is Konoha. Well, what can I say... er, she lives in the room inside the house's outer building, and we're also in the same school level though our classes are different. She'd been like a childhood friend since I was a kid and----"

"And she's not human."

Fear said without a pretense. It was followed by few seconds of silence and,

".... That's right. She's like your sempai here in this place."

"I thought so. A lid would never break into half by itself. I know that tools who could assume human form could usually keep the nature of their

original form even if they turn into human form----I suppose you're some kind of blade aren't you?"

"Would you answer me if I asked what was your original form?"

Konoha asked with a smile pasted on her face. Fear replied with a snort. Uncomfortable silence went on as they ate their dinner. All of their plates were almost empty when Fear spoke to Haruaki.

"So, you wanted to say earlier that I could believe what you said because there's a precedent."

"Er....Yeah. that's right. Konoha did a lot of helpful things like working part-time since when she first came here."

"He's right. Thanks to my deeds, I'm almost free from all of my curses."

"Almost, you say. What would happen if you become completely free from curse?"

"Tools with only a slight curse would just turn back into a normal tool. But according to my old man, the negative energy that built up inside the tools who could assume human form went over the original nature that it had so even if you were able to neutralize those negative thoughts, their human form will be kept. That means that you two will just be free from the curse that you have."

"So, I won't turn back into my original form..... I see."

"To be honest, I don't know much about it. Just ask my old man once he comes back."

Fear wasn't even listening to Haruaki. She just kept silent and nodded, murmuring "I see... I wouldn't...I see..." as she did. It was as if she was trying to hide the expression of relief on her face. Fear finished up the remaining food on her plate and asked a question to Konoha.

"Haruaki said earlier that you've been together with him for more than ten years now. Does it really take that much time?"

"I think it also depends on the degree of your curse, but..."

Two empty plates covered the table. For a moment, two eyes----one silent and one with a hint of hostility----looked at each other.

"The amount of grudge that we'd accumulated within ourselves are so great that whatever you do, we can't easily forget, throw away, or repent for them... You get on my nerves, but at least, in that aspect, we could have something in common. This is something that could be shared between you and me, as a same ruined state of mind."

Fear started to say something, but just looked away and said;

"....It's the same for me, you know. You get on my nerves too...."

"Well, you just have to take it easy. I think there's nothing I could help with though."

It was a composed statement of a senior. Konoha had said those words with a lot of ease. Fear, of course, just snorted.

After that, Haruaki also finished his meal, so he cleaned up the table with Konoha and went to the kitchen to wash them. When he came back, Fear was hugging her knees and was looking up at the ceiling with a blank stare. He brought an after-dinner tea, so he handed one to Fear and started drinking his.

"Oh yeah, Konoha, could you bring some of your old clothes? I wouldn't say right now but I just thought that it would be better if Fear had something to wear. I know that the size won't fit though."

"...Sorry for having small breasts!"

"I didn't mention any part of your body that wouldn't fit!"

Haruaki almost dropped the yunomi that came from the opposite side of the table.

"I guess that can't be helped.... Alright, I'll bring some as soon as I can."

"I'm counting on it."

"Say, what are you going to do for tonight, like where'll she sleep?"

"Huh? Well, I suppose she's gonna spend her night here. I'll just lend her one of the Japanese rooms."

"S-She'll be staying here?! Isn't that a bad idea, since I think it is!"

"But you see, the outer building's already full... Kuroe isn't home and her room is locked."

The outer building was made like an apartment, with two rooms inside. Konoha was living there with another housemate, but she was always away for about half a month, so Konoha didn't really feel that she had a housemate living next door.

"By the way, make the guest room as luxurious as possible. That way, you can compensate for what you did to me."

"Compensate?"

Haruaki asked Fear, and he received a reply with a threatening attitude.

"Don't say you already forgot what you did to my body earlier! Playing with my body like that... I've never had someone put his finger [there]! My face was burning with embarrassment!"

Haruaki was about to say that Fear was just a box at that time, when he heard a sound of yunomi rolling off on the tatami. He saw that Konoha was trembling as she stood up. A false smile covered her expression for a while but it eventually broke into tears.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! I can't believe it! Have you two already done THOSE kind of things?!"

Konoha ran away from the living room covering her face with her hands. They just heard the violent sound of the entrance door being shut. Fear just nodded with content and said,

"I'm not sure what happened, but I've won. I feel great."

Part 3

Dull-colored stone floor was all that there was. The room smelled of metal and of metal-like stink. The air was congested but it wasn't stagnant. The air was clear. Clear like the air inside a tomb or a casket. There wasn't anything that could tell time. There was only a dead space, without a trace of any living things. The only thing that you could feel from there was the constancy and blockade. The mass of steel that was left there didn't have anything to do other than to whisper the same words over and over again. It wasn't even said aloud. It just made circles within its mind. Like an endless loop. When it's awake, while it's asleep, when it opened its mind, and when it closed its mind. It's freezing, it's cold, it's dark, it's freezing, it's cold, it's dark, it's freezing, it's cold, it's dark, it's freezing, it's cold, it's dark. It went on and on-----

She opened her eyes. There was nothing inside the Japanese room. She raked up and embraced the futon that was given to her. There was only the sound of scraping futon. There was some warmth left in the futon but it was a false warmth... It was just an accumulated heat from covering someone. So, it was the same as having no warmth at all. Shards of her dream sent a chill down her spine. She knew that there was a difference between this room and the dungeon room where she was kept. But, even though there was a slight warmth and sound inside this room, she couldn't help thinking that this room was the same as the place where she was kept. She silently opened the sliding door and walked along the porch. Moon light illuminated her path as she arrived in front of another room. She entered. A boy was sleeping. He was laying in an odd position and his futon came off below his waist. A slight snort came from a faintly smiling face. The girl kneeled down before the rolled-up futon and slowly reached for it. She stroked it for a while, then she brought it up to her cheeks. It was someone else's smell. Someone else's warmth. That, perhaps, was the first time that she felt those things.

Part 4

Next day, during lunch break at school. Haruaki opened the lid of his lunch box and thoughts about the problem he left alone in his house came to his mind.

(I wonder If she'll be alright alone. I left her a note and some leftovers from my lunch box, but... Wait, what if she can't read?)

When Haruaki visited the girl in her room this morning, she was still sound asleep with a happy expression. He tried to wake her but she didn't wake up so he just left her a note that says he's going to school and he'd left her some food. Haruaki wondered if she was still asleep. When he woke up this morning, his futon was gone. When he entered the girl's room, he saw that the girl was covered with HIS futon while hers was abandoned on the corner of her room. How it happened was still a mystery to him.

"Hey Haruaki! What's with you? You petrified all of a sudden after you opened your lunch box... Maybe you should be moving your body more, not just for cooking and housework. Baseball is great, if you'd just give it a try!"

A classmate whom Haruaki always had his lunch with spoke to him. His name was Hakuto Taizou.

"His withered expression is nothing new, but it does have a different glow compared to his usual expression. Maybe---- he made some girl pregnant? Hahaha!"

"Kana! Enough of your vulgar jokes!"

A girl with healthy sun-kissed skin, Miyama Kana, followed Taizou's teasing with her own. The class rep, Ueno Kirika, remonstrated Kana about her vulgar remark.

Kirika let out a disgusted sigh and turned to face Haruaki.

"Forget Kana's reckless remark. But, I too think that you lack the concentration that you usually have. Is there some thing that makes you anxious?"

"Huh? No, no, I don't have any problem. Maybe I caught a chill last night."

"Did you hear that Taizou-san? Kirika-chan just said something like this: I'm always looking at Yachi so I know something's wrong with him! Ohh, If there was something I could do to comfort him..."

"What a villain you are Haruaki! Since when did you steal the class rep's heart? Did you save a princess? Have you set a fire to a forged bill factory? Did you kill someone in a clocktower with pair of scissors?"

"Both of you! Stop s-saying nonsense! How foolish!"

Taizou and Kana had been Haruaki's friends since his junior high years while Kirika became his friend in high school.

Kirika was a formidable class rep. She was calm and composed at all times and her grades were top-notch. She always wore a knee-length long skirt, which gave her an impression that she was born two decades later than she should have. She also hated to expose much of her skin, and was always wearing a jersey during physical education classes and even at summer, she wore a long-sleeved blouse. Because of this, only few people tried to get close to her and she was often alone during her first few days. It was only Kana, who was friendly to everyone, who forcefully brought Kirika with them. There was a specific reason though, why Kirika started to take her lunch together with them.

"Setting aside those worthless remarks, let us proceed to our daily showdown. I'm confident with my fried eggs today. I'll get back for all my previous losses! I'm counting on you two for the judge."

Kirika opened her lunch box and brought it to Taizou and Kana's table.

"So, Kirika-chan. Do you think you have a chance of winning today?"

"I've tasted it several times. Plus, I got hold of the fact that Yachi might have caught a cold... that means his taste organ might not be working well. I decided that today is the day."

A spirited glare pierced Haruaki.

"Oh...where is she getting all that motivation...?"

"Well, they say that maintaining health is part of the battle. We only care about the taste, so don't worry. After all, we are the judges. Alright, here I go---!"

"I'll have this first! -----Wow Kirika-chan! These fried eggs are just great! I love the crunchy bacon bits!"

"Really now? So, it's great huh? Hehehehe.....!"

Kirika saw the two gave her food a good evaluation and smirked. But, that smirk was off her face immediately since the battle was still ongoing. The judges reached for Haruaki's lunch box and-----

"Akki's fried eggs are delicious too! It's soooo good! Hmm I wonder where this strange taste comes from?"

"Haruaki, what did you add to your fried eggs?"

"I've put some avocados in it. Hehe, I based it from an old cooking manga."

Taizou and Kana looked at each other and nodded. They grabbed the winner's lunchbox and raised it above their heads, looking like funny symmetrical statues holding a lunch box.

"Um, the tastes were both great but we decided that Haruaki won for his novel idea!"

In that moment, Kirika lowered her head, both her hands shaking.

"Ugh....! Novelty.... They're right. My attention was tied to the taste and I failed to give a thought about an original idea....! So I learned today that a conservative idea alone is not enough to go against the ever-changing idea these days!"

".....Hey, class rep, I keep telling you that you shouldn't be THAT serious with the battles."

Haruaki tried to reassure her. Kirika raised her head and said;

"I can't keep on losing to a man especially when it's about cooking! I'll win for sure next time!"

He'd already heard that line many times. But, telling that now to the class rep would be suicidal so he kept his mouth shut and just returned a bitter smile.

After that, they proceeded on having their own lunch for a while. A little later, Haruaki heard a classmate calling out to him that he had a visitor. He looked at the door and saw a familiar face.

"It's Konoha-san! She's just as...well, you know, as always! Damn it Haruaki, please tell her that I, Taizou, send my appreciation for her being as beautiful as a belladonna!"

"I don't know why Hakuto would choose a poisonous flower to compare her to. It's plain stupid."

Haruaki ignored the conversation behind him and walked over to the door. It was his first time seeing Konoha in school today.

"What's up?"

"There's nothing important, really... It's just that I worry about that girl..."

"I tried to wake her up but she wouldn't so I just left her alone with a note."

"What?"

She froze.

"Was it ok to leave her alone?"

"From what I saw last night, I think that she's harmless enough but, hmmm... now that you mentioned it, I'm starting to worry about her. After all, we didn't talk that much."

"Have you seen her.... original form?"

"Just a little bit, when I saw her for the first time. She was a big mysterious box."

He started to think about something for a moment but decided that he had no idea what she was and shook his head in surrender.

"Well, if you say that she's alright, I guess she is. I suppose there's nothing to worry about."

Konoha bowed her head in good bye and went back to her classroom.

(She said there's nothing to worry about, but....)

When a person starts to worry, it won't leave him until he checked on what was worrying him. It was like having second thoughts about your answer in an examination when you checked it over for a correction. Haruaki had no choice but to stare at the slow-moving clock inside the classroom and wait for the time to go home.

After the classes, Haruaki and Konoha met in front of the school entrance.

"Don't you have a student council meeting today?"

"I've passed for today. I felt like it."

There was an understanding between the two. Haruaki hurried back to his house together with Konoha who was publicly known as his related cousin. They arrived at the gate, opened it quickly, then entered the house. There they saw----

"What the?!"

They saw that the inside was horrible. Turned back table was standing in a slant position, its leg piercing the sliding door. The cabinets turned over. On the floor was unnecessary things that should have been inside the closet scattered all over.

....Just in a half day, his place of rest became a place of chaos. Something extraordinary must have happened here.

Haruaki searched for the silver-haired girl, his heart beating wildly. He found her immediately. She was lying face-down on the porch. Not a movement from her. He kneeled over her and picked her up. He tried to talk to her while he shook her body. Her eyes opened and she blinked with a blank stare. Konoha went to the kitchen to get some water but hurriedly came back.

"We've got a problem! The kitchen too is in wretched condition!"

"Just what in the world happened here... Fear! Come on, Fear!"

"Ugh..... Stop shaking me... I'm alright..."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Oh, you just don't know what I've been through."

Fear sat up and held her head. Her head was drooped as she breathed in and out, as if saying that she was about to say something very important. She raised her head and said;

"Listen... A light green-colored alien with three legs came here a while ago and----"

"Haaaaa!"

Before Fear could finish, Haruaki's hand went to the back of her head. A good sound came out from his strike.

"W-what are you doing all of a sudden?! You want me to curse you?!"

"I should be the one asking you what were you doing! I get it, you had nothing to do so you tried to destroy the house didn't you? Look at what you did!"

"Y-you're wrong..."

Fear faced away.

"Then how can you explain my collection of rare dishes being sucked by the vacuum cleaner?! I could only take it as a presentation of malice against me! Have I done anything to you?!"

Haruaki cornered her. Fear just made a sullen face and glared at Haruaki.

"Shut up! I don't care what you say about me! I'm feeling sleepy so I'll go get some sleep! Don't even try bothering me!"

She ran away to her room. Haruaki was taken back by her sudden outburst and lost the will power to follow her.

"That little... tsk, she should try to be the one who'll fix these things up! So this is how she repays me for my kindness!"

"...Um, excuse me?"

Konoha was the one who was poking Haruaki's shoulder. She said to Haruaki in an awkward manner;

"I think that in that situation, you have some faults too, you know."

"Why? I can't explain what she did other than playing a prank against me."

"Well, if you try to look at things around you, maybe you'll see what I mean. Try to look over there on the garden. Or at the kitchen"

Haruaki tried to look at where she pointed out. It was totally different from how he left them this morning. He still couldn't see anything other than Fear trying to play a-----

"....Huh?.... That girl... was she trying to...?"

What Fear did first when she entered her room was to mount on a pillow and punch it to get some stress out of her body. The moment she got out of breath, she took the futon out and covered herself with it. But, that didn't completely take out her anger.

"Hmph....Hmph! That idiot, that shameless brat....! He doesn't have to be so..."

He didn't even try to listen to my explanation. How annoying. Well, to tell the truth, she wasn't that enthusiastic about trying to explain things to him...

"There's no way I could tell him what I've been up to."

She can't explain THAT to him. It was too embarrassing and too disappointing. She had that much pride, at least. She couldn't help it but----it was annoying. After letting out a big snort. She rearranged the futon and covered her head again.

Part 5

For the few days that Fear spent together with Honatsu, she was taught by him the basic Japanese reading and writing, as well as the common knowledge about the modern world. That was why Fear was able to read the note that Haruaki left for her. She thought that leaving her alone here was impertinent but there wasn't anything she could do about it so she just

ate the breakfast/lunch that Haruaki left for her. After the meal, Fear murmured to her self.

"..... Phew. How boring."

She was sitting at the porch and looking up at the sky. That was when the "urge" hit her. It was a refreshing experience since it was her first time, but it was kind of embarrassing thinking about it-----The call of nature.

"Being a human wasn't as comfortable as I thought."

She went to the washroom, making a face. After a few moments, her mission was completed.

"Now that was convenient. Haruaki said that it was called a faucet. I was quite amazed."

Fear stood before the wash stand, washing her hands and thinking about the great changes of the world around her. She mastered the use of faucet. Though she was amazed sometimes at the technology, she thought that it was not enough to make her afraid. While she was shaking the water off her hands, something inside the room caught her eye.

"Hm. I know that machine. It's called a "Washing machine". You put water and detergent to it and it will wash the clothes automatically."

Fear remembered what Haruaki said last night. She had to do something that [people would be thankful for] in order to lift her curse. Now, she thought about her current condition. She had nothing to do. Maybe she should start doing something that would be helpful for people. Haruaki also said that it would take a lot of time to lift the curse. If so, she should start early to finish earlier than it will originally take.

"....Hehehe. Thank me for what I'm going to do. And marvel at my true capacity...!"

First of all, she grabbed the clothes in the laundry basket and put them inside the washing machine. Next, she searched for a box of laundry detergent and found a box of powder besides the washing machine. She tried to smell and it smelled like soap. She thought with confidence that this was the laundry detergent. Finally, she put the detergent inside the washing machine-----one whole box of it. After the procedure, she tried to push different buttons and saw that the machine started to operate.

"I can do this...hehehe. I'm amazed by my adaptation ability. Well, maybe I should clean the house next!"

The thing that she needed was called a vacuum cleaner. According to Haruaki, it was a box with long nose attached to it. She found the vacuum cleaner inside the closet.

"I know too that this machine requires electricity. There should be a nose-like hole on the walls. Hm, this should be it. It does look like a nose hole. But, hmmm this fork at the back of the vacuum machine won't reach those holes.....Wha?!"

The cord extended as she played with the plug. She was surprised by the unexpected movement. She coughed, held her head high, and looked at her left and right.

".....It was just a feint. I knew about that."

She inserted the plug into the consent and tried to push all the buttons of the vacuum cleaner. It revved up and started to suck in dust. Perfect. Fear slowly moved the vacuum and cleaned the whole room. She started to enjoy using the vacuum, so she proceeded on cleaning anywhere that she pleased. She gradually got used to it and became faster as she cleaned. Though, there were some unknown phenomenon where the cord became heavier and crashing sounds resounded behind her. Fear tried to look back but something more important entered her sight. It was a black eight-legged insect that was crawling above the tatami.

"A s-spider?!"

Goosebumps rose all over her. Fear asked herself why did it have to appear in front of her. She vilificated her luck and tried to run away but she quickly turned back in self denial, thinking that she shouldn't back off against a spider. Grabbing the vacuum cleaner, Fear rushed to the spider. The machine she was holding wasn't a convenient vacuum cleaner anymore. It was an advanced weapon that could send that wretched spider into another dimension.

"Turn into ash with the power of electricity!"

The spider quickly changed its direction and was able to evade the attack. It went inside the open closet where the vacuum cleaner was placed. Fear couldn't hold back so she inserted the vacuum inside the closet and tried to suck in the spider. The vacuum hit other things inside the closet while fear

was maneuvering it. They came crashing out of the closet. The vacuum must have sucked in something big since the vacuum suddenly stopped working after raising a weird sound.

"What the?!"

She was the one attacking a while ago but now the table was turned against her. She backed a few steps and quickly shut the closet door. She sat down, let out a sigh and thought of letting go of the closet door. What should I do? Should I attack again? No, there's no need. he won't be able to get out unless I open this door. That's right, I'll just keep it shut. I'll just have Haruaki terminate it when he comes home.

"I didn't see anything..... Yes, that's how it is."

Fear saw an object familiar to her rolling near her feet. It must have come from the closet. It was a cube in a size where one could hold it in their palm, having a surface of 3x3 tiles. Every tile was painted with different colors. She slanted her head and tried moving the cube. The colored tile shifted. She thought that if the tiles are moved right, the color on surface of the cube would be uniform.

"..... Oh! I forgot that there are things that I should be doing right now."

Fear placed the cube back on the floor. That moment, she heard a buzzing sound coming from the washing machine. She remembered that she was washing clothes.

"....Well, it certainly is showy. I wonder if it was necessary to do that much."

Bubbles were bursting out from the washing machine like a mountain. Not only that, the overflowing water made a pool on the floor. Anyway, if there are washed clothes then they must be hung to let them dry. Fear rescued the washed clothes out of the washing machine and placed them in a basket. She got out into the garden and went to the drying pole. The garden was carpeted with green grass and it felt good to her bare feet. Fear stood before the drying pole, wrung the clothes and set them on the pole to dry. There were triangular beak-like things on the pole but she didn't know what its used for so she put them away. Maybe it was a charm or something.

"This is the last....one. Phew. It's perfect."

The clothes waved like a flag. Thinking that she was the one who did it caused a strange sense of fulfillment course through her.

It came when she tried to turn back, confident about her victorious feat-----A gust of wind.

There was no way she could go after it, and the towel went up over the roof. She made a wry face and jumped high onto the roof. She heard a sound of something breaking below her but the towel was more important at that moment. She collected the towel and jumped down to the ground. At that moment, another gust of wind came, as if it was playing a prank against her. Because of this, some of the clothes flew high up onto the branch of a tall tree. She clucked and placed the collected towel on the pole. The moment she let go of the towel, the gust carried it up again, on to the tree branch. Damn. It was endless.

"..... Er, well. Clothes will dry faster if there was a wind to dry it. That means that those clothes over there on branch will dry faster. When viewed from a broad perspective, it was better that it went up there on the tree.... or at least, I think that way."

She forcefully convinced herself and turned back to the house's direction, trying not to look at the waving clothes on the tree a strange thing came into her view. And it was....

First, there was the living room. The cabinets were turned over and the table on the center was slanted into a weird position. Its foot pierced through the sliding door. The cord constricted around the table. She didn't notice because of the appearance of the spider and the cubic toy. Somehow, she thought she knew what that caused weird phenomenon earlier. Adding to that, many things which came from the closet were scattered on the floor and the vacuum cleaner was lying dead on the floor. Fear also noticed that something fell from the roof and saw that it was a gray-colored roof tile. It must have been the breaking sound she heard when she jumped over to the roof.

It was the first time that Fear thought that something was strange. It seemed that the house became disarranged, more than before she started cleaning. In fact, she had a feeling that it was completely wretched. She wondered why.

"Could it be that I have done something wrong?"

Two people's footsteps answered her question. Fear slowly went over the porch and laid on her stomach, thinking. A poltergeist or an alien. Which would be more credible if she were to reason out?

Part 6

"HMMMMMMMMMM. I have this feeling that what she tried to do was too predictable but, could it be really...?"

Haruaki murmured to himself while looking up at the laundered clothes swaying on the branches of the tree located in the garden.

"If she was just playing around, she wouldn't think to put laundry detergent into the washing machine.... Except for the amount she put in it. If you go to the washing machine right now, you'll see for yourself that it's throwing out bubbles like a crab."

Konoha raised her hands and formed a "scissors", trying to imitate a crab. Haruaki picked up the Rubik's cube that was laying on the floor.

"Really. Where did she find this thing?"

"Um, Haruaki-kun...? Do you remember the time when I first came here?"

"I can't remember much of the details, but I do. You did some strange things back then."

She came to this house when Haruaki was about to enter grade school. Of course, he didn't remember the clear details but he could still remember Konoha's impression.

"I thought so. Well, I wanted you to forget all about it at first but thinking about it it now, I'm glad that you still remember how I used to be."

"Why?"

"Hehe. You just have to tell Fear-san what you told me back when we first met. With that, I bet all the problems will be solved."

"I don't remember what I told you. What did I say back then?"

"Well, Haruaki-kun didn't change a bit so you just have to tell her what's on your mind right now."

After that, Konoha offered to help cleaning up the house but Haruaki politely refused. He felt that it was something he had to do, and not anyone else. Konoha didn't argue with him. Later, after Konoha went back to the outer building, Haruaki left the Rubik's cube on the table and looked up at the ceiling.

"Oh hell. What am I supposed to do...."

In that evening.

"Hey. Are you awake?"

He waited patiently for the answer. After few moments, it came to him.

"Shut up. I'm asleep."

"No you're not. You answered my question."

"Shut up and be silent if you don't wanna be cursed."

"Alright, alright. So, don't you have something to say?"

After an interlude of silence, Fear replied that she didn't have anything to say to him. Haruaki said never mind and sighed. Talk about being stubborn.

"You might not have anything to say to me, but I do. Well, er... I'm sorry."

There was no reply. There wasn't anything he could do for her silence so he just continued speaking.

"I already knew what I should have done, but I forgot. You look like a human but you aren't-----but in reality, you're a human so you might have some difficulties at first. There might be things that you wouldn't understand, and there might be times where you bother other people. There also might be times where you have a quarrel with someone. Konoha also went through all of that."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about but don't compare me to that cowtits. It's unpleasant."

"Yeah, okay. Well, what I want to say is... that you don't have to hurry trying to lift your curse. And, if there is something that you don't know, just ask me and I'll teach you so long as it is something that I know. I left your

dinner at the kitchen so you can have it when you get hungry. I'll be going now. Oh, I forgot, here's my present for you. Take it."

Haruaki left the paper bag he was carrying onto the floor in front of the sliding door. After that, he went back to his room, yawning as he walked away. After a few minutes, the sliding door silently opened. After some minutes of observation, a white hand came out and took the paper bag. The sliding door moved silently as the sliding door closed.

Inside the paper bag was some clothes. They were kind of big but most of them were universally fitting one pieces. There was also new underwear that was wrapped in a plastic. A note fell from it saying "Only underwear should be brand new for infants"....

"Drop dead!"

Fear threw the note on the floor by reflex. She noticed that behind the paper was another note addressed to her. It said, "If you want a bra, try to work part-time and buy it yourself. You'll be able to do so when you get used to living here..... Well, we're cursed tools so our bodies won't grow. That means that there won't be a need to, I mean, it would be just a waste of time if you...."

A heel drop struck the paper before Fear could finish reading. There were other things inside the paper bag other than the clothes. It was the cubic toy from earlier. And, there was also...

"....a rice cracker."

Her stomach growled. Haruaki said that she ate all the stock so he must have bought it for her.

"H-Hmph. I won't be bribed that easily. Does he think I'm such a child that I'll fall to his scheme?"

Despite her muttered complaints, her hands opened the snack and dug-in to the treat. Her other hand played with the Rubik's cube. Sound of creaking plastic filled the room.

"Hm. Sesame seeds. It's coated with sesame seeds. How fragrant..."

Fear thought about Haruaki while two sounds resounded inside her room. Well, I'll forgive that shameless brat for now. He should thank my merciful

heart. First things first-----I should ask him where this wonderful snack is being sold.

Chapter 2 - Do Something, to Something, at Somewhere / "When contents of the cube are exposed"

Part 1

"Look at your plate when you're eating! The morsels are falling off the plate!"

Fear answered yes. Again. She'd answered the same word several times already but her eyes were fixed upon the square box that was placed on the corner of the room.

"Hmmm. I'd thought that you'd say something clichéd like, 'What are those small people doing inside that box?!'."

"D-Don't take me for a fool. I know how that thing works. This box just shows a place far from here. And the power of electricity makes it possible to record the past. It's true that this is the first time I actually saw it but, uh, just like what I imagined. There wasn't much surprise with it,ahaha-haha-haha..."

She let out a false laugh while making a serious face. Her fork wandered around her plate, though it was empty. The news caster on the television said, "Good morning, everyone! Let's do our best for this day!" and Fear answered, "Yes. I don't know you but I wish you luck," with unnecessary politeness.

"Hey, Fear, try this one out. I'll teach you how to operate the television."

"What is that thing?"

"Try pushing that prominent red button. Face it towards the television."

Fear received the remote control. She looked a bit tense as she tried to push the red button just as she was told.

"Wha—! The image disappeared!"

She looked astounded as she reported what happened to Haruaki. He told her to try pushing the button again.

"I-It, I mean, the image restored!"

She reported again with exactly the same expression.

"That's the On/Off button. Keep the television off when you're not using it. There are lot of other buttons but you don't have to use them. The only buttons that you could touch are the buttons with numbers written on it. "

"Are you sure it's alright? I'm gonna push it? You hear me, I'm going to!"

The channel changed to a different news program doing a report about sports. It was about the F1 Race so F1 cars passed in front of the camera. Fear, being a bit ignorant about these things, shouted "It's coming towards us! Look out!" and crouched on the floor. It was just as how Haruaki expected her to react.

"So, that's how it is. If you push the buttons, the channel would change. Whatever happens, the images won't come out from the television so you don't need to worry."

"I-I knew that! It's just that... er... yes! It's just that you have to be prepared for the unexpected! No one knows what'll happen next, uh-huh."

Fear tried pushing other buttons. Haruaki noticed that a faint pink shaded her white cheeks. She only stopped pushing different buttons when the channel switched to a weather report. Her finger went still and her eyes stared at the television in awe.

"Is that the... sea?"

Haruaki answered affirmatively and she whispered softly, her eyes still fixed on the monitor,

"...I never had a chance to see it. I didn't think that it would be so big."

Different shades were behind those eyes. There was the shade of admiration... and there was also a bit of disappointment.

"It looks a lot colder and darker than what I expected..."

"That's because there are some rain clouds over there. It's completely different in summer."

"Is that so."

"We also have that here in our town. It's on the opposite side though. You could go someday if you want to."

Fear shook her head in a vague manner. Haruaki wasn't able to decide whether it was an affirmation or a rejection.

The doorbell rang and Haruaki went to the front door carrying his bag. Konoha was waiting behind the door, smiling. Konoha usually went to school together with him when she didn't have work on student council or club activities.

"Good morning!"

"Okay, let's go."

"Hmmm... What's the meaning of this?"

"We're going to school. Didn't I tell you that we have to go to school during weekdays?"

"With her?"

"Well, yeah. We're in the same year, after all."

Haruaki finished putting on his shoes, stood up and pointed at Fear.

"I have an order for you today. It's about your work while I'm away at school."

"...Tell me."

"First, turn the television on like I told you earlier. Watch any program that you like. When you get hungry, there is some food in the kitchen. When you feel sleepy, go sleep. That would be all. I wish you luck."

"Only that?!"

"Yeah. Hey, I'm gonna teach you household chores later so be patient for today, okay?"

Fear expanded her cheeks like a balloon. Haruaki was puzzled. He couldn't think of any reason why Fear would be dissatisfied with his order. Konoha peeked over the front door, smiling like a saint.

"Don't tell me you can't take care of yourself alone because you're lonely?"

"W-Why you?! Who told you that I'm lonely?! I'd be glad that there won't be any more annoyance like you two! Oh, I'm so excited. The world on the television is waiting for me now!"

"You'll be fine alone then. Great. Splendid. Well, let's go now, Haruaki-kun. To the happy place called school. TOGETHER."

"A happy place you say? Hmph! I'd bet that you'll just use those great tits of yours to flirt with him! How shameless! C'mon, go now, go! I can't wait to be alone, you know!"

"Er—I'm kinda worried about Fear but I'll be late for school at this rate. It can't be helped. Let's go, Konoha."

They went out of the gate, towards the road. Konoha moved with light steps and Haruaki scratched his head. Fear was letting out a fierce snort as she watched their backs disappear from her vision. When she felt that they were gone, she let out a deep sigh. She sat down in front of the door. It was silent. Everything around her was unmoving. The wooden ornament above the shoe rack. The patterns on the wooden ceiling. The mirror on the wall. The calendar besides it. She felt that the cold silence of those inanimate objects welcomed her—As if they knew that she used to be an inanimate object just like them.

She embraced her knees and slightly bowed her head. She looked at her silver hair as she observed it sliding between her knees, while she whispered with an empty voice.

"Fool... Did you really have to leave me alone...?"

Part 2

He was used to taking up weird passengers. It was natural since he worked in a place where different people come and go. He was a taxi driver stationed in front of the airport. In the past, he had black passengers who used the word FUCK in almost every sentence they used. He also had Chinese people who carried imitations of popular game consoles. He even had passengers of a Japanese family who asked to be brought to a forest or swamp where no one else lived. If he were to think back about every passenger he had, it would take forever. But—This passenger was the weirdest among all the passengers he had. The driver moved his eye over the back mirror to check again at the lady passenger he picked up earlier. She was a blonde Caucasian beauty who wore an elegant gown. That was

normal. But, other than that, everything else about her was strange. Too strange. He wondered how she was able to board a public plane wearing THAT thing.

"I have this feeling that I am being watched."

The woman who mouthed a thin cigarette spoke in a fluent Japanese while she kept her view toward the window. He wondered if the woman was intentionally ignoring the "No Smoking" sign on the glass. The woman shrugged, and the faint sound of creaking metal echoed.

"Er, excuse me, miss...?"

"Oh. Not you too."

Who else was she talking about? There wasn't anyone else in the taxi but them two. The driver trembled lightly as he thought about his passenger looking more ominous as the time passed by. There was still some distance from the hotel that they were heading for. The driver thought that he had to make a lighter atmosphere for both of them. After all, she was still a customer despite her eerie impression.

"You speak the Japanese language very well. I've had many passengers from different countries but you're the most—"

"Weirdest passenger?"

The driver felt as if an icicle passed through his body, from his mouth out to his anus. Somehow, he was able to regain his composure and replied.

"Aside from the fact that you're the best Japanese language speaker among the passengers that I've had, you're also the, um—most beautiful, ma'am."

"Hmm. I wonder if all the taxi drivers in this country are all educated about etiquette. I say it is just what you may expect from Japan, the polite country. It is indeed a great thing."

It seemed that the driver answered right. He calmed down a bit hearing the soft laughter coming from his passenger.

"It's not just a flattery, ma'am, not at all."

"Haha, I don't really mind if it was a flattery. My favorite author said in one of his books that 'You should bear in mind that a lie is the key to every

happiness, benefit, reputation, and wealth.' —It is an anti-social statement though."

"Er, never heard of it before, ma'am... I suppose he's a foreign author?"

"Indeed. Marquis Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade is known for his anti-socialism."

After the passenger explained that to the driver, she started to laugh again. The driver wondered what was so funny.

"Did you come here to Japan for a vacation?"

"Unfortunately, no. It is about a matter concerning my work."

"I see that you're dedicated to your work, ma'am. May I ask about your occupation?"

The strange beauty raised her face, looked at the driver through the back mirror, and smiled. That moment when the driver's eye met the passenger's, all the calm that he accumulated during their recent conversations vanished. A strong need to get far away as soon as possible from this passenger made the driver kick the accelerator hard. It was, after all, just as he thought. There was no way that woman having that kind of eyes is sane. Those eyes filled with cold disdain, as if they were used to look down upon the people around her...

"Oh, my work? I came here for a little trash-cleaning."

Part 3

A few hours had passed since Fear was left alone in the house. She quickly lost interest in watching television.

"Phew, I have nothing else to do... ."

It was the same word that she said yesterday. A thought suddenly came into her mind. If she was bored inside the house, She should go outside. She wore the sandals that were left on the porch and walked around the garden.

"....boring."

Fear walked around the outside of the house a few times, making a wry face. The outer building of the house where Konoha was staying came into

her view. The ground floor was covered with silver shutter. She thought that it was a garage or something. Her eyes went up to the second floor window, and she remembered what happened this morning.

"Er what can I say...Isn't Haruaki being a little bit biased to that cowtits? That shameless brat...I also don't like the fact that cowtits got her own proper room while I have none. Talk about being unfair. Doesn't he even think that I also have things that I wanted to do? He always say 'Don't do this' and 'Don't do that'..."

She mumbled complaints and started to walk back toward the main house—but stopped.

"Oh yeah, he didn't say that I shouldn't do THAT. Hmm, I suppose there's no problem with me doing THAT so he didn't mention anything about it. Yes, it must be so."

Fear nodded to herself. But, there was one little problem.

"So, what should I do now...?"

Fear looked up at the sky and tried to think about what she had to do. The next moment, she realized that the answer was simple. She grinned.

She looked up again at the outer building. There she saw the vast sky...and the little window on the second floor of the outer building, peeking from the corner of her eyes.

Taizo came back from his trip to the nearest vending machine to buy their drinks since he lost in the rock-scissors-paper game. But, he came back without carrying any juice, shadowed by his dark expression. Haruaki who was having his lunch with the usual members looked up to ask Taizo what happened.

"Is there a problem, Taizo?"

"Hey, Haruaki... I know it's not good. But I can't help myself—I know that this line is too clichéd to use nowadays...But, I just have to say it! Tell me, Haruaki, can I say the words that are meant to be said in a situation like this?!"

"W-What are you saying...?"

Haruaki sent Taizo a blank stare. Suddenly, Taizo grabbed Haruaki by his neck.

"Why! Is it! Always you!"

"Argh, Ergh?! What do you think you're doing, idiot! Tell me what happened!"

"Ask that to yourself, Bastard! Aren't you content with Konoha-san?!"

"I'm telling you, I don't know what you're talking ab—oooooooooogh!"

"Eeew! Gross!"

"Hey, Yachi! Something came out from your mouth!"

Haruaki forgot to apologize to Kana and Kirika. He couldn't believe what he was seeing right at that moment. It was—a silver-haired head peeking out from the room's rear door.

"Hey you over there! Didn't you say you'll tell me where...Ah, so there you are."

Fear approached him with a self-possessed calm. For some reason, she was wearing a school uniform.

"Hehehe. I came here just as you wished, Haruaki."

Fear held her head high and told Haruaki triumphantly—When the atmosphere in the classroom became tense.

"Fear?! What are you doing here?!"

"You're asking me why I'm here. Well, you didn't say that I shouldn't go out or shouldn't come here. So, that means I can go to any place I want to."

"I didn't tell you anything because I thought that it was obviou—argh!"

Kana who was sitting beside Haruaki grabbed his head and pressed it against his lunch box. Kana used that as a force to stand up, her eyes shining bright with interest. She went beside Fear and started hugging her.

"Wow! She's so beautiful! How cute!"

"Er, woman. Stop touching me."

"Oh, I love how you speak! So, your name's Fear, huh? Where did you come from? What kind of relationship do you have with Akki...uh, I mean, Haruaki-kun?"



"What kind of relationship, you say....I wonder too. Basically, I live in his house."

"Are-you-two-living-together?!"

"My old man! I mean, she's the daughter of my old man's friend that he made abroad! That's why I have to take care of her in place of my old man!"

"Hmm... So you two are staying in the same house. Looks like...there are some things that need to be confirmed. As the class representative, of course."

Kirika stood up with strange vigor. Soon, all the other people in the class started to gather around them. Haruaki dropped his shoulder in defeat. He just gave Fear a look that said she musn't say anything unnecessary. Fear just nodded. It seemed that people around them thought that Fear was a girl who came from abroad visiting the school because she had nothing much to do. Needless to say, news about Fear quickly spread outside Haruaki's class.

"H-hey?!"

Haruaki looked at the direction where that voice came from and saw pale-faced Konoha staring at Fear. She must have been on her way back to her class from the school's shop since she was carrying a handful of sandwiches.

"Why is she...?"

"She came here by herself. I'm going to lose my consciousness now. I'll leave the rest to you, Konoha..."

"What do you want me to do?!"

That moment when Konoha entered the room, a boy left the circle forming around Fear. It was Taizo who changed his attitude as he saw Konoha coming to their room.

"K-Konoha-san! W-Welcome to our room! Our room's kind of sordid since half of us are guys but I hope you won't mind! So, what can I do for you?"

Konoha answered his question with a polite smile. An idea came to her mind.

"Um, I was planning to have my lunch with Haruaki-kun... and since there's also Fear-san, I would have liked to eat with her too but as you can see, there are too many people so..."

Taizo moved to break the circle surrounding Fear just as Konoha expected him to. He ignored all the boo-ings coming from the crowd and proceeded to sending them away. Konoha smiled her thanks and Taizo turned back, making a guts pose. Haruaki thought that he's a type who'd be tricked by a woman in the future.

"Hm—Oh, it's you. You needn't have come here."

Konoha moved her lips without making a sound. She said, "You're the one who shouldn't have come".

"Come on, get some more tables. Two more."

"Ah, hey Taizo, we're not..."

"Huh? You guys aren't gonna eat with us? Is there going to be a problem if I and Kana are present?"

"A lunch, is it. Sounds good to me. I found a lunch box back at the house so I stuffed some food in it."

Fear answered without any pretense. It would sound strange now to force that they're not going to have lunch with them. But, if that was the case, Haruaki needed to remind Fear of some important things before they proceed to having lunch together.

"I'm gonna buy some drinks for us while we tour her around the school. C'mon Konoha, let's go."

"Yes, I'm coming now. Um, can you please hold these for me?"

Konoha handed Taizo the three pork cutlet sandwiches that she was holding, then started to follow Haruaki. Stares directed at Fear kept coming even when they were passing through the corridor—but, that can be ignored for now.

"You there, what were you thinking coming here all of a sudden?"

"Huh? I already told you that I came here because you didn't say that I can't come here, haven't I? Well, there's also the fact that I didn't have

anything to do in the house. Besides, it would be unfair if this woman can attend school while I'd just be staying at home."

"It's not like I started to attend school right after I became human..."

"Really...I should have told you clearly that you can't go out yet, since you still lack much common knowledge."

"Why you! Didn't you hear earlier that I was having a normal conversation with the people in your class?"

"I'm sorry to inform you that I almost had a heart attack while you were talking to them since I was afraid that you'd say something that you shouldn't. Let's just leave that topic. What's important now is that you should keep your setting that you don't know much about Japan since you just came here. If there was a question that you don't know how to answer, just shut up, smile, then shake your head. That's the Japanese way of solving problems."

Haruaki bought some drinks at the vending machine in front of the shoe racks. Fear observed Haruaki, seeing something unusual for her. Konoha spoke to Fear while she was busy checking the vending machine.

"I was wondering since you came here... Where did you get that uniform you're wearing?"

"It's obvious who's uniform this is. The waist and the chest parts are too big and wide for me. You should get some weight off you."

"Y-you dared to violate my room?! Don't you know the difference between things that you should and shouldn't do?!"

Konoha drew her face near Fear's and glared. Fear just bent her mouth into a cool smile.

"Oh...So you think you can say that to me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Listen Haruaki, I found really gaudy underwear in her top drawer and—"

"No! No! No! I wasn't quite myself when I bought that!"

"What are you two fussing about? We should go back now. I already bought the drinks."

Haruaki started to walk, and looked down at Fear.

"I heard some of your conversations...You should know that entering one's room without permission is against the manners."

"Hmph, it can't be helped. I at least know that one can't enter school without wearing a uniform. Besides, I was able to come here because I asked people where is the school using this uniform."

"Weren't you supposed to give up coming here at the point that you didn't have any uniform...?"

"By the way, how did you enter my room? I locked the door properly."

"...? What do you mean? I just entered by the window like anyone else would."

"That's strange. I remember locking the window also...Wait. D-don't tell me you...?!"

Fear made a "V" sign with her hands against Konoha, who froze up in outrage.

"That's right. I broke it."

Konoha staggered, as if she was standing on the balls of her feet. Haruaki let out a soul-escaping sigh. He didn't want to think who will pay for the glass' repair.

"...Damn. I can't take any more of this. You wear me out. Hey Fear, go back to home when you're done eating. I don't know what the teachers would say if they happen to see you."

"Hmm. I still wanted to see this 'lecture' thing. Can't I stay?"

"Of course, you can't!"

While they were having an argument, Kirika appeared from the opposite side of the corridor, walking towards them.

"Oh, it's you class rep. Where have you been?"

"I just went to the staff room. Be glad to hear this Yachi, and you too Fear-kun."

Staff room. That word sent a bad feeling nagging at his gut. That bad feeling hit right at its mark.

"I negotiated with the teachers and as a result, our foreign visitor here was granted a special permission to participate in the afternoon classes. No need for a word of gratitude, by the way. I just did what I can do as a class representative. Besides, we don't get to have much chances of having inter-cultural activities. It would be a good experience for both of us."

Haruaki wanted to say that it was an unwelcome effort but swallowed the words. Kirika continued to speak with a half-opened eye.

"With that, I'll get more time to have conversations with Fear-kun. There are still some things that need to be confirmed—Like the fact that although he's living together with his cousin, they're still man and woman in their sensitive ages...Who knows what kind of unwanted accident might happen between them...!"

Observing from the dangerous gleam in her eyes, this was obviously the main reason why she had a negotiation with the teachers about Fear.

(Ohh damn, from where should I start complaining?)

In the end, Haruaki just dropped his shoulders and gave up opposing. It was clear that any complaint coming from him wouldn't be heard after all. At least, he knew that much.

"I didn't get much of your conversations, but does that mean that I could participate in the lecture? Kirika, was it? You're a nice person!"

One of the reasons why Haruaki gave up complaining was the fact that Fear looked happier than he expected.

Part 4

After handing a tip to the bellboy who was educated enough to make a forced smile, she hurried to unpack her baggage. Those trunks which she received from the front desk were sent sometime ago from her country in advance. She proceeded in her confirmation of the contents of the trunks while she enjoyed her cigarette. Those things she needed were all there. There was no apparent problem.

"....? I have a feeling that there is an excess among the baggage..."

The last trunk, which was shaped like a guitar case, was not familiar to her. She drove the almost finished cigarette into the ash tray, then opened the last trunk. There she saw—

"This is..."

A strain formed on her cheeks. It was the form of deep hatred and wrath. She shut the trunk hard. The momentum from the banging revealed a note from inside the trunk. She picked up the note, read it, and crushed it inside her hands.

"Oh, this is none of their concern, absolutely not...bitch!"

She assaulted the trunk and sent it flying across the room. The expensive-looking flower vase which decorated the suite shattered aloud.

"What an ill-omened way of beginning a mission... Ahh, I need to calm down, I just have to—"

She walked around the room for a while. Later, she grabbed the cigarette case on the table. She sunk deep into the sofa and started to smoke. One stick was consumed. She went on to her next stick. With her third, she started to retrieve her calm. After she finished her third stick, the cellular phone that was included among her baggage rang. The voice that came from the opposite side of the line was a girl's.

"I am the Auxiliary who was assigned to aid you in this particular mission. This is my initial contact."

"How kind of you. I arrived here safe and sound...I had this feeling of being observed since I came to this country...I suppose it was you?"

"I affirm. I've started to support you. Since your first step in this country. It is just usual for the Auxiliaries not to show themselves."

"Of course. It would be a shame for a Knight if it happens that his Auxiliary will show himself in the battlefield. Since I'm the one sent as a front-line, there is absolutely no chance of that happening though...Oh, and one more thing. Are you responsible for this unnecessary trunk that was included among my baggage?"

".....? I do not understand what you mean."

"I'm talking about this shit equipped with an indulgence disk. It seems like you're not responsible for it. If that was the case, there isn't any problem."

I'm glad that a fracture didn't occur between our relationship as a team from the very beginning of this mission—Well, come on now my faceless and nameless Auxiliary. Let us move on toward our parting without ever revealing our faces or even our names."

"I understand. Let us begin the mission."

With that, the voice coming from the phone stated the current location of their target. She was glad that an efficient Auxiliary was allotted to her. After she was done with their conversation, she smiled and whispered while she looked at the smoke that accumulated at the ceiling of the room.

"I must go now. Off to eliminate that eyesore-bitch."

Part 5

They were at the rooftop after the classes. The wind blowing from the faintly cloudy sky felt chilly against their naked skin. But despite that, Fear looked down at the school ground below looking cheerful as ever.

"It's so high up here, and it feels great...Come to think of it, I should have seen the view of the ground from the airplane when I came here. That was a mistake."

Then, she smiled at something that she remembered.

"By the way—that lecture thing sure was fun. I still remember the look on their faces when I spoke in English. I think that anyone could speak fluently with two days of studying though."

"Our basic capabilities are very different from your kind so don't compare us with you..."

Haruaki muttered as he dropped his shoulders. He felt as though he experienced a mental torture while they were having the afternoon classes. Fortunately, there hasn't been a fatal mistake—but, thanks to the order to give Fear a tour around the school directed by some meddlesome teachers, his mental condition wasn't fully recovered even after the classes were finished. Beside Haruaki was the tired-looking Konoha leaning against the fence. Fear was also accompanied by Taizo and others at first but they eventually parted because of their club activities and student council duties. In the end, Only Haruaki and Konoha were left.

"Hmm. Looks like that ball game below is about to end. I noticed too that people are becoming fewer."

"It's about time where most of the club activities are wrapping up for the day... Can we go home already?"

"That's a wonderful idea. Let's go home and have something to eat."

Fear heard them but made no motion of letting go of the fence.

"I guess you two are right. But...a little bit more. I want to stay here...a little bit more."

Haruaki looked at Fear's back for a while. Finally, Haruaki let out a sigh of defeat and said that she had 10 more minutes to stay there.

"Hey Haruaki, Don't you think this place is—nice?"

"Is it? There's no people or anything around here. It's not much of a view."

"I wasn't talking about the view. I meant this place called school...Its very lively and there are an unbelievable amount of people. Every one of them is kind of happy in their own way. Really, I never saw a place like this."

She said with a soft voice, making a bitter smile.

Haruaki heard a clicking sound. He looked at Fear and saw that Fear was playing the Rubik's cube with one hand while her view was still fixed at the ground below. He thought that he saw a hallucination where there was no one else here in the rooftop aside from that girl. He thought that she'd stay here even if they left her alone. Just like seeing a painting of a solitary girl from outside of the frame.

"This kind of school was just recently made...It's just natural that this place would seem rare to you."

Konoha's words stopped his hallucination. There was a feeling of consolation in her words. Haruaki wondered if that consolation came from understanding of Fear's feelings.

"The city that I passed on my way here was just as rare. After all, they are the same—There are a lot of people and it's noisy there. Haha, I wanted to ask them what there was that all of them have to talk about."

"Was there only few people from where you came?"

"Where I came, you ask..."

"—Er, there's no need to answer if you don't want to."

It was only then that Fear looked at Haruaki's face. She was smiling. Her cheeks were slightly relaxed, her big eyes turned into slits, and her well-formed lips were faintly raised up. But, for some reason, he thought she looked like she was about to cry.

"Haruaki. Do you really want to know?"

".....what?"

"I'll be the one to ask now. Do you want to know about me? About where I was, what I did, or what I was in the past? Do you really want to know all of that?"

She was still smiling. And it was harmless question. But, there was a strange tension in the air around them. Haruaki swallowed his saliva. He felt that something might happen if he answered Yes or No. He had no idea what it could be. He just knew that whatever it was, there would be no backing off once she told him about herself.

Konoha just looked at Fear's face with serious expression. Fear kept her sad smile. Both of them were waiting for his answer. He licked his lips, inhaled some air, then opened his mouth to answer—

"I'll tell you the first answer to your question, about where she had been staying. She was lying inside a hidden chamber of a dungeon inside a castle remains for hundreds of years. That was the reason why she was able to escape our attention for so long."

A voice coming from the rooftop's entrance stole Haruaki's words. What she said WAS an answer to his question. And, just as he thought, that triggered the incident that could never be undone. Ever.

Part 6

It was a woman who donned a dress much like those nobles wear. Her blonde hair was slightly curled, and held between her sexy rouged lips was a cigarette which was unbecoming for her aristocratic demeanor. But, her most outstanding trait was her arms—which were covered by a black armor from the tip of her fingers up to her shoulders. That big, thick armor was worn in a candid manner, and it gave a rustic impression. The armor

also covered the back of her hands and her wrists. The shiny black plates were held together geometrically, and the equipments was as thick as her torso. There was only one word to describe her appearance: Deformed. It was as though an armplate of a giant or a part of great armor was detached from its body and was forcibly attached to her arms. Naturally, this made her look like a balancing toy.

"Wh...who are you?"

Haruaki spoke to the woman even though he was overawed by her strange vigor. Hearing this, the woman giggled.

"You don't have to use terms of respect to me, boy. I came from an organization called the 'Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion'...and my name is Peavey Barowoi. Some people call me by the name, 'Balancing Toy'."

Her armor-covered arms grabbed the tip of her skirt and she made a graceful bow. She did it with an almost absurd politeness and exaggeration.

"Huh....? I don't get what you want to—"

"Strange, you don't seem to recognize my name—In that case, let me confirm one thing. Your family name is Yachi, no?"

"Er...well, yes. It is."

"Then, let me explain. We, the Knights' Dominion, are taking a stance against Yachi Honatsu. All started with the discovery of the location where THAT thing behind you was kept. We sent an investigation team the moment we got hold of the information but we were forestalled. Usually, they don't leave traces but this time they did, since that thing is much different from the usual items. Somehow, we were able to get hold of the information where that thing was sent—and, here I am now. Need I say more?"

That. Thing. Where it was sent...and, his father's name. They meant only one thing.

"Y-You're after Fear....? But why?"

"A silly question. The discovery of that thing is a matter of concern for all the organizations that go after a cursed item—which we call a Wathe. But,

our purpose is different from that of other organizations, namely, Lab Chief Yamimagari Pakuaki's Nation, the Draconians, and the Bivorio family. We're different from Yachi Honatsu too. It's simple. The Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion does not approve of the existence of Wathes. It is something that should not exist within the human world. Therefore I—"

A long trail of smoke came out from the end of the cigarette she held between her lips. She spoke cheerfully.

"Shall destroy that—that 'Fear-in-Cube,' top on the list of all Wathes."

An understanding of who she meant by that word came easily to him. Haruaki looked back at Fear and saw that she had her head bowed, with her face pale. Peavey spoke again.

"The Marquis de Sade wrote in one of his works; 'Their ground of argument about the justification of the pleasure earned by cruelty came from the following reasoning: We all desire for something that could move our hearts. That is exactly the reason why men are absorbed in seeking pleasure, and we desire to have that pleasure in the most active manner'. Though I am a woman, I am moved, deeply so, by those words! By the cruelty that shall take place here and now!"

Words suddenly switched into action. She fluttered her dress and made a dash toward Fear.

"—! Haruaki, run!"

"Haruaki-kun!"

Fear pushed Haruaki away, which caused him to stagger. Konoha moved to snatch him away from Peavey.

"That prudence is worthy of a praise! A pig like you shouldn't involve anyone in this!"

It was a simple attack. She raised her gauntlet-shrouded fist—then brought it down with all her might. Fear evaded the attack by performing a side-roll. Crashing noise signaled the end for the ground where Fear was standing. Peavey spat the almost-finished cigarette out while her body layed in a low position, just like a beast. —It was another action which didn't look good with her dress.

She withdrew her arm which was stuck on the concrete, and remains of the rooftop floor dropped from her gauntlet. This made the caved-in condition of the floor visible, and it looked like a crater made by a meteor crash. Impossible—that was what Haruaki thought. He couldn't think of a way for a woman to inflict that kind of damage. A possibility came to his mind.

(That gauntlet.....could it be a Wathe?)

The hunter, donning a dress and heels, made a simple attack once again. Fear desperately evaded the assault. She barely got away from having contact with Peavey's arms but in exchange for her, the concrete floor beneath her broke. The steel fence got crushed. What used to be a bench now scattered around them as broken pieces of wood. A side of the water tank was pierced with countless holes.

Eventually, Fear was cornered. In front of her, Peavey who blocked the way, moved her arms and the gauntlet creaked. It was as though she was preparing for the kill.

Peavey made a decadent smile while she licked the drop of sweat that rolled off from her temple.

"Strange. Why are you just running...? It isn't like you to hold back, [Fear-in-Cube]. From what I've heard, you're not supposed to be that way."

Fear looked-up in surprise and spoke with a forced voice.

"S-Stop....Don't say it"

Peavey raised a brow. After a moment, the dawn of understanding caused her shoulders to shake in laughter.

"This is amusing, indeed it is! Could it be that the boy over there do not know the details about you? Let me tell you the rest of the answers for your question a while ago then!"

She opened a part of her gauntlet which seemed like a clasp. She drew out a cigarette and started to smoke. Together with the accumulated smoke came out a voice filled with ridicule and teasing.

"You asked 'What she did in the past'. The answer is simple. She slaughtered people. That thing shamed them, forced an end to their life, craved for grievances, drank their blood, and just killed them! Tens, hundreds, thousands of them! Sinners, non-sinners, men, women,

children, the aged, commoners, nobles, slaves, scientists, farmers, merchants, priests, mid-wives, and even the knights!

"No.....no...no...no...."

"You killed them all equally like a God, without any discrimination, didn't you? Shamed a wife and driven her into insanity in front of her husband? Ripped the womb of a pregnant woman and took out her child, ending its life along with its howl? Gave food to the starving vagrant, ripped his stomach open and enjoyed the scream of agony he made while you slowly killed him?"

"Stop it.....stopitstopitstopitstopit! I-I was, I, ahhhhhhhhhhh!"

Fear's whole body was shaking. She embraced herself with a pale face.

"Y-you're wrong....wrong. I, didn't, do it, with my will. I, was just used. I didn't do it because I wanted to...!"

"How could you be so low! You're trying to reason your way out even though you're just a thing. But, it's a fact that you killed them, is it not? After all, that was the reason why you were cursed. Oh, how you disgust me. To tell you the truth, just talking with you like this makes me want to vomit!"

"Shut up, shut up....just...shut...up!"

"Like hell I will! Think about it once more. About what you really are. Wait, I was mistaken. I should be the one to tell you what you really are, shouldn't I? After all, there's still the answer left for your question, 'What she was in the past'.

Don't say it. Whispered Fear. Haruaki thought the same. But, that didn't stop the word from coming out of her mouth.

"[Fear-in-Cube]. It was developed during the period when the pagans were being hunted down. She—that thing—is just an multipurpose torture-execution instrument."

"Stoooooooooooooooooop!!!"

"I can't help but to burst out laughing at that wonderful scream. C'mon now, you've committed sins. You sinned by executing countless innocent people with torture. That curse which made you personify is the vindication of your sins. You have to take the punishment as you should, don't you? You have

to be silent and accept the fact that a thing like you should be destroyed when you became unnecessary."

Haruaki clenched his fists. He just can't accept those words. He wanted to say something. He wanted to ask her if she knew the strong determination needed to accept the fact that they're not just a tool anymore and live with the curse that was branded to them. To accept their unfortunate fate that they have to feel the pain of what they did in the past.

"If you have no intention of resisting, that is also fine with me. Just the thought of destroying another hateful Wathe is a pleasure in itself!"

Peavey raised her arms. There was too much distance for Haruaki to move in between them. But, that moment, he heard a faint whisper of rustling dress behind him.

"Stay here, Haruaki-kun."

The brown-haired girl jumped in with inhuman power. Beside Haruaki stood a girl. A girl who like him, felt a surge of anger against Peavey. Maybe, her anger was greater than his.

She jumped over the few meters of distance between them with ease. She made an attack from above which was almost at a right angle, her uniform fluttering. The woman in a dress quickly turned over and evaded the tegatana that was meant for her—while Konoha landed between Fear and the woman in a dress, her eyes blazing. Peavey made a quick look down at her slashed skirt and made an exaggerated gesture of spreading her arms wide.

"Oh my, oh my! Why is it that no one told me there was another disgusting garbage here? I never noticed. Although it's not part of the mission, I could destroy you if you are going to interrupt me from accomplishing my first priority. What do you say?"

"Don't misunderstand my intention. I have nothing to do with the infant behind me. Please take my action this way—I got irritated with what you've said so I attacked you. After all, I'm one of the ill-tempered youth these days."

Those words were spoken gently. It almost sounded like a joke. But, her eyes were still overbearing.

"If you don't want to get hurt, I advise you to leave now."

"...Hmph. I like you, girl. You look cool-headed and unyielding—but, that's what makes me want to put you to shame. What did they call this wonderful expression of oppositions? Was it tsundere?"

"I wouldn't know!"

Konoha raised her palm and formed a blade with her hands while covering the distance towards Peavey. The lady in a dress raised her heavily armored arms and deflected Konoha's attack with ease. Peavey countered with a hook that attacked the whole body. Konoha hastily raised her arms in defense, but the difference in their mass resulted in Konoha being thrown away.

"You look pitiful for someone who sounded energetic just a while ago. Poor, is the only word that can describe you right now. I do not know what tool you are, but half-hearted attacks won't do any good against me, you understand?"

Konoha had sunk-in against the nearby fence. Seeing this, Fear let out a shout against her.

"Y-You too...this has nothing to do with you. What do you think you're doing...!"

"—You're right. Didn't you hear what I said a while ago? What I'm doing doesn't concern you so just let me be."

Konoha tried to loose herself from the fence. While she was at it, she spoke to Fear without glancing at her.

"By the way, it's something that doesn't have anything to do with me. What are you planning to do? You're cursed. That's a fact. You've been through a past that caused you to be cursed. This too is a fact. Your life's being threatened because of it. Another fact. What are you going to do to face those facts?"

"...I wouldn't be troubled right now if I knew the answer to that..."

"You're saying that you're giving up and you're going to let her destroy you?"

"...I wouldn't like that..."

"Then, you have to fight. You have to fight in order to protect yourself. That's the natural way things go. But....I say, knowing how you feel sure is a pain."

"What...and how do you know anything. About how I feel."

Konoha whispered. her eyes were directed at her front.

"I understand how you don't want to hurt anyone. I understand that you do not want to fight. I know that the harder you try to forget, the more it comes back to haunt you. That causes you to hesitate, even if your life was in the line... Really, I feel as though I'm looking at my old self, I can't really describe how I feel right now."

Konoha stood up, took a deep breath and rushed towards Peavey. She got thrown away again but this time, she did not crash against the fence. It was because another person that appeared in front of Fear caught Konoha's back.

"Both of you, sorry. I was kind of confused and that took me some time."

"Haruaki-kun...."

"Have you gone mad...? Get away from here! Hurry and run!"

"Er, I don't think I'll be much of a help but I suppose I could lend you my hand."

Haruaki turned away from astounded Fear and faced Peavey.

"Look here boy, what you're trying to do is a foolish act. Although I could not actively kill a person, I might not be able to help you if ever there was an unfortunate accident. And, if it comes to you trying to help out those bitchy tools.... Well, won't you change your mind?"

"Sorry, I can't do that. This girl came to our place, relying on me. I just can't say no and drive her away, can I? Besides, Japanese people are a merciful lot.... Oh, and one more thing. I got irritated by the same reason this girl wearing glasses got irritated with you. So, right now I want to make you take back all the things you've said. I'm not fond of fights, though."

"That's funny. Would you mind telling me how you're going to do it?"

That was the problem. He looked down at Konoha, who stared right back at Haruaki.

"You...fool...this is my problem and..."

Haruaki twisted his lips as he heard those words.

"She's mumbling awful things at me. Is trying to protect her such a bad thing?"

"Though I'm not at complete disagreement...I think you're being your usual self."

"I'm not sure what you mean. Hey, I hate to ask you this since you hate to do it, but it seems that we're at odds with our current situation."

Instead of answering, Konoha just smiled and took a step. When her eyes met with Peavey, the smile was already gone from her face. The only thing left on her expression was an earnest determination.

"If you're not satisfied with half-cooked attacks, I'll turn back into myself. For a reason, I'm trying to avoid shedding blood but I won't be responsible if it would hit you bad. I just wanted you to understand that."

"I see, so that's how you're going to play your game. It's fine with me. Oh, I forgot to ask your name, miss garbage. I'm going to need it in my report later."

Haruaki placed his hands on Konoha's shoulder. In a moment the clothes Konoha was wearing fell off the floor and—

The only thing left on his hand was a long inorganic-substance. Its blade was covered with a black sheath. It was abnormally thin and hard. It was as though the blade was coated with a thin black metal...and, it was sharp enough to be called a sheath-blade.

Words were spoken by the cursed Katana.

"My name is Muramasa Konoha... But, I hate to be called by my surname."

She caught the heavy blow with the katana. The terrible impact passed through Haruaki's arm but it wasn't enough to throw him away.

"Relax your body like you always do...! I'll take care of your body movement!"

Haruaki replied to the voice coming from the katana that he was counting on her. Konoha, the demon blade, took over his body movement and made

a step forward. The almost-weightless blade flashed, aimed towards the enemy's body, slashing diagonally from below. Peavey frowned at the great speed of the blade but she was able to block the slash using the elbow of her gauntlet.

"That was a good one. Now, I'm starting to have fun...! By the way, why don't you draw? I heard that the Japanese blades were awfully sharp. Am I wrong?!"

"Like I've said earlier, I despise bloodshed.... Don't worry, even if its just the sheath, it'll be really painful!"

The sheath-blade and the gauntlet crossed each other countless times. Hi-pitched sounds coming from the clashing steel was starting to hurt his ears.

"It's too hard... Is it possible that something could be that hard?!"

Even though his body was being moved by Konoha, that didn't mean that he wasn't feeling exhaustion. His breathing was becoming shorter. Konoha took note of his condition, and jumped backwards as she saw the enemy's fist sinking into the rooftop floor to put a distance from her.

"Are you alright, Haruaki-kun?"

"Yeah, I can still....w-whoa!"

One careless moment and a concrete-floor fragment was flying toward his head. The katana smashed the fragment down. Haruki thought with a shiver that he'd be already dead if Konoha wasn't moving his body.

"However, we might lose if this keeps up."

"I have an idea. If we're going to lose at this rate, why don't you try that one? The one you used once before...the [交叉法 -Kousahou-]. Though, I suppose you'll hate to do that more than you hate being back to this form."

"Oh, okay....I'll try. I think there won't be a problem, I'll just have to be careful."

"It's not the time for you two to be having a cozy talk. You boy, helping out those garbages! You're an eyesore so I'll be really glad if you'll just die right now!"

The awkward, but symmetrically aligned balancing-toy joyfully started her bloodlust.

Konoha parried the blows as she did earlier. But, she started to take a new action. She changed the mark of her actions within herself. It was not an attack and it wasn't a defense either.

She started an analysis.

What was needed was complete concentration. She had to direct all of her thought on trying to find a flaw in Peavey's movement, using all the non-existent braincells to concentrate on every single action made by her opponent. Her breathing. The line of her sight. Her posture. Her movement. Which attack would come based from which precursor. She made a law out of them. At the same time, she made an analysis of the gauntlet's structure based from the resistance taken from the blade. Where was its weakest spot, structure-wise. Where was the [core] which supported the whole structure of her gauntlet. Unbelievable amount of concentration was needed to figure all of that out.

The other thing needed was the chance. She had to join the faint precursors together, make a forecast on when the attack would come, and wait for the moment when the effect would come to agreement with it.

(Not yet. She's still....)

She evaded the attack. Waited once again. Impatience was out of question. The law she made was constructed upon the territory within herself, between unconsciousness and instinct. It would easily disappear the moment her concentration was broken. She felt the gradual loss of the forecast she had made so far. But, she wasn't impatient. And—



(——!)

This was it. An attack which came from a certain direction and speed according to the conjecture she made from the countless precursors. That moment was a future that she knew well, coming from her past. That was why she was able to make a pinpoint aim for the gauntlet's [core]. There, Konoha threw away the law and conjectures she had formed and let out an attack coming from her body and soul— Konoha turned Haruaki's hand which held the katana, and moved the unused left hand to hold its sheath. She instantaneously shifted weight, and at the same time drew the blade, as though it was a manifestation of its true nature.

'—Sword-Kill Counter!'

The clashing sound of the blade and sheath vibrated through the air surrounding them. The silver edge that came out from the sheath-blade flashed for an instant, just like lightning. Now, the blade was already returned to its dark sheath, making the opponent think for a moment that the flash of light she saw was just a hallucination. The counter attack made by the katana used all of the force coming from the enemy's heavy blow, destroying the structural core of the gauntlet. Therefore, only a single blow was needed to put an end to the gauntlet.

There was no movement coming from the blade, which stood in a posture of follow-through. For a while, silence reigned through the air—and after a few seconds, the insensitive steel finally recognized its death and started to fall into pieces, as the last cry of inorganic gauntlet resounded around them.

"Just what....did you do? Yes, I'm mildly surprised...you bitch, bitch, bitch. I never thought that you would insult me this way."

Konoha's blade destroyed only the weapon of her opponent. The gauntlet that covered one of her arms broke, falling apart in a chain reaction. The damaged gauntlet was left now with a big hole, exposing its inside.

There was an arm.

Naturally, there was an human limb inside. It was revealed then that the gauntlet was covering flesh and not some artificial arm—However, there was a possibility that the gauntlet might have been the artificial arm.

Her whole arm was distorted. Its skeletal frame was abnormally crooked. Her skin looked as though it was suffering from necrosis, discolored with shades of black and purple. There was also traces of fresh blood here and there.

"What, the hell, is that....?"

"You're questioning me what happened to my arm, although you're the one who did this. I'd say its just natural that bare flesh covered with an ordinary gauntlet would be distorted like this if you repeatedly beat it with force strong enough to crush concrete."

"You're saying it was just an ordinary gauntlet, and not a Wathe?"

Peavey raised an eyebrow at Haruaki's question.

"I wouldn't dare to touch those filthy things! I'd rather bite-off my tongue. Though, there are some within the Knights' Dominion who prefer to use those. But, I do not. That's why I'm armed with this gauntlet. To add further..."

She stared at her discolored arms with teary eyes.

"I just adore this, this pain that I receive from battle. It's very convenient indeed since I'm satisfied sexually when I feel the pain while I crush my enemies with my hands. Don't you think it's wonderful?"

"You're insane..."

"Oh my, what a tactless remark that was. I'd say that People have different tastes and therefore you have no right to judge me. In fact, you shouldn't insult my tastes since it occurred naturally, and you can say that it's a sin caused by natural causes."

Haruaki was taken aback by the woman standing in front of him. She was plain crazy. Suddenly, he noticed that the katana he was holding was becoming heavier every minute. He tried to ask Konoha what was happening, trying not to move his mouth. Konoha answered with a groan.

"Get hold of yourself! The blood is caused by her madness! It's not your fault!"

She replied this time with an emesis. Cold sweat covered his face as he remembered that Konoha's curse was almost lifted. The blood-thirsty demon blade was starting to lose its longing—which meant that Konoha

was now repulsed by seeing blood, enough to cause nausea when she saw it. They succeeded in destroying their opponents weapon, but that only brought them this destitute situation. Haruaki shuddered and raised his head, only to see Peavey closing the distance between them. It seemed that the gauntlet left on her other arm was enough to crush them. She struck with a rough blow. Haruaki raised the heavy blade by reflex, and miraculously blocked the punch....but—

For a moment, he wasn't sure what was wrong. Something caused him to look down. There he saw that something was protruding from the side of the gauntlet. It was a hidden blade which was thin and long. It reflected light towards his face.

"Eye for an eye....as the wise men say. Pretty clichéd though."

Haruaki wondered what was the red liquid passing through the blade. He also wondered where it came from. He traced back where the liquid was coming from. Then, he knew where it was coming from...It came from his arm. The time that he realized the blood was coming from him, his brain finally registered the pain—

The howl that came from Haruaki resounded through the rooftop. That cry caused two things to awake within Fear....and it was fear and nostalgia.

She felt that something was pulsating within her. It was something that should not awaken, at any cost. The cry of pain was nostalgic. She was disgusted with herself for reminiscing those cries. But, those vague memories which resembled a faint dream caused a definite change within her. (that scream) (which I thought I'd never hear again) (It was the same scream from that moment—)

There was a master of an ancient castle. In there was an underground chamber which was a realm of madness. There was herself, sleeping in that chamber. She was still inanimate back then, but her master was pleased with her. Therefore after her master was done with his [enjoyment] every night, he made his footman clean her up. The footman was the only sane person left within that castle. Even though he vomited every time he cleaned her up, in the end she'd be shining like a brand-new appliance. And for that, she used to like the footman very much. The footman often talked to her while he cleaned her up, complaining about the work which he hated to do but was forced to out of need for money.

"I don't know what got into my master's head...I'm sure that this box would be happier if it was just left alone. Oh God..."

—One day, one of the maids heard the footman and the gossip about the footman's words spread within the castle in no time. Naturally, the master of the castle who heard about the footman executed him in the torture chamber. Consequently, She was used to torture the footman. The scream was caused by her own hands. It was a scream coming from someone she knew, from someone she liked.

"Aaaaah. Aaaaaah. Aha.....haha, ahahahahahahaha"

It pulsed. The her of THAT time pulsed. She remembered. During that time, she was still inanimate. The reason for an inanimate object's existence was to be used. That was why she was happy. While she heard the footman's scream, she felt that certainty within her. Because the footman's scream certified the reason of her existence. It made her long for more screams—

"Aha—You're wrong—ahaha—shut up. Stop laughing—ahahaha—shut up, stop laughing, I said stop! I'm different now ahahaha different! I'm not thinking of those things aha haahahahahahahahahahaha!"

Fear tried to stop the laugh that flowing from her mouth, punching the concrete flooring below her with a distorted expression. But, the laughing did not stop. When she held her head, the laugh resounded through her head, instead of ceasing. She heard Haruaki's repeated screams. When she raised her face, she saw that Haruaki had dropped to the floor. The blade he was holding lied heavily down, and she knew that it won't be moving for some time. Someone whispered in Fear's head that he would be killed. But, she refused to become what she used to be because she did not want Haruaki to see what she really was. It was too disgusting, and too soiled....But, if she didn't do something, Haruaki will surely die. Fear asked herself what she should do—

That moment, Fear noticed the Rubik's cube that fell out from her pocket. She stared at the katana held by Haruaki once again. And, she remembered that Konoha fought even though she was in human form.

"A tool which was cursed enough to achieve the human form could still use some of the characteristics as a tool, even when it was in it's human form...."

It was the same for her. She had not tried it yet, but she knew she could. Therefore she needed to.

"I... have to do it....."

She tried to convince herself. It shouldn't be that bad. She still hated what she used to be. She was just going to use a little power, while maintaining her human form. It didn't mean that she was going to betray her decision on trying to lift the curse away from herself—

Fear did not realize that it was a compromise. She didn't know that compromises always broke determination. Then, all the things she was trying to push back came out inside her, just like a dam. There was nothing to hold back anymore. She only had to do what was needed. That moment, a comfortable sense of freedom shrouded Fear. There was nothing left inside her but the urge to break everything apart.

"Ah yes, that's what I'm going to do....."

Peavey saw that Fear moved to stand up. She let out a scornful laugh at her.

"Hmm, I see that you decided to stop crying now. So, what are you going to do now?"

"You're asking me what I'm going to do? Of course—"

"I'm gonna hear you scream. And I'm very excited. Ahahahaha", Fear said with cruel and cold eyes, tightly clutching the cube in her hand.

The hand holding the toy was thrust out.

Konoha was able to change into a blade that could be wielded by hand, but everyone had different characteristics. Fear's characteristics were much more complicated compared to Konoha. Hence, in order to utilize it—

"—Emulation start."

In the short time it took to say those words, the Rubik's cube transformed. Rather, one should say that it underwent a variation.

Maintaining her original posture, her arms could hug the black iron box.

Ignoring the laws of physics, the palms of her hands were firmly attracted to the iron box. In order for Fear's characteristics to appear, she needs to

have this kind of object. In order to become 'her other self', she needs something similar to this cube.

"Defining apposition with generation, connected. Semi remote control materialization equipped."

As if expressing its weight, the cube gave off a dull thud as it landed on the roof. Fear's palm continued to face downwards. A strange chain extended from her palm and connected to the cube at her feet. Rather than interlocking rings, the individual chain links were black cubes connected to one another by opposite vertices.

Wrapping the chain from the cube around her arm, Fear gently gazed at her other self and spoke softly.

"Mechanism No.26 piercing type, imprisoning form: «Iron Maiden»—Curse Calling."

In that instant, the cube transformed. Minute crevices slid horizontally. The upper portion rose like a curtain. The sound of metal parts sliding against one another, expressing the movement of the parts. Horizontal movement. Vertical movement. Rotated. Raised. Sunk. Combined. Separated. Buried. Bent. Switched. Extended. Supported. Leaned. Essential parts moving outwards. Unused portions retracted. Pieces required for decoration moved to the outside. And parts required for internal structure hidden within.

Thousands of parts which can assemble into thirty-two different forms. The cube was merely the outer shell of a standby state. As it is operated, it took on the form of a torture tool—

In terms of actual time, only an instant has passed as the sound of metal friction subsided. The cube was no longer a cube, but resembled a coffin the length of a normal human. Originally hidden and packed in the intricate curves of the cube's interior, but now assembled into the shape of a head and shoulders. What was portrayed was the image of an untainted girl. The Iron Maiden.

"Go, the other me that takes my form. To hear more of those screams!"

As Fear rattled the chain wrapped around her arm, the Iron Maiden began to glide.

Peavey jumped away from Haruaki's side, but the iron maiden changed direction and pursued her with Fear's manipulation of the chain. As if offering its purity the Iron Maiden exposed its interior as commanded, releasing its locks. The front of the Iron Maiden opened up as if offering sweet embrace to entice the victim to enter its spike-laden inner space.

However instead of fleeing, Peavey advanced and used her remaining armored hand to strike the Iron Maiden using pure strength alone. Metal clashed against metal, creating a high pitched screeching, and the Iron Maiden bounced away.

"...Mechanism No.8 crushing type, circular form: «Breaking Wheel of Francia»—Curse Calling!"

Reacting to the command, the Iron Maiden transformed without returning to the cube state. In an instant, it had become a round wheel, with numerous short and thick spikes on the edges.

Fear deftly stepped forward as she motioned with her right hand. The wheel connected to the chain attacked Peavey. In the same way Peavey had crushed the limbs of uncountable victims, both guilty and innocent, the wheel was poised to wreck her life. As the turning wheel descended upon her head, Peavey blocked. The falling wheel bounced off the roof, damaging it, but flew towards Peavey's body once again.

"Ha...haha, you finally show some fighting spirit? This is great!"

Fear did not respond. It seemed like the smile on her face was a bit empty. Seeing the wheel about to be caught by Peavey's armored arm, she swiftly pulled the chain back and rushed forward at the same time.

"...Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»—Curse Calling!"

Curling the chain back, in Fear's hand was now a dangerous looking drill! The length of a knight's lance, and ominous like a grim reaper's scythe, its edges sparkled luxuriously with the glint of sharpness. What it sought was soft flesh, soft flesh, soft flesh.

"Hoho—That's right, I was waiting for this! A tool made only for hurting others, I wonder what kind of screams it makes when it gets hurt itself! Ah, how I look forward to it!"

The armored arm clashed with Fear's drill two or three times, then Peavey feigned an opening to lead the drill towards her face and evaded at the last second. The spiral blade narrowly missed her face. Taking such risk to obtain an ephemeral opening, Peavey charged into close range. The drill retracted but could not attack again as quickly as the speed of Peavey's strong arm.

"Okay, begin to scream with pleasure, inferior object of the lowest class!"

However, Peavey did not make contact. What she saw was the drill penetrating the roof they are standing on, and Fear using it as a jumping platform. But as a result, there were no more escapes. One cannot dodge in mid air. As Peavey delightfully prepared her fist for a counterattack—Fear laughed and laughed against a backdrop of the dark, cloud-covered sky.

"Regarding ways to make songs out of screams, I am more experienced than you by centuries. Scream!"

Peavey suddenly noticed the drill in front of her giving off a strange noise.

"...Mechanism No.3 severance type, descending form: —"

Peavey instinctively retreated but because she had advanced too deep it was too late. The drill transformed into a quadrilateral frame. Peavey withdrew her body, moved her head and retracted her right arm. But—

"«Guillotine»—Curse Calling!"

It was too late for the naked left arm laid bare due to Konoha's destruction of the armor—

Peavey's left arm was severed cleanly by the descending thick blade.

And then, the screams desired by a certain someone were uttered by her own mouth.

Part 7

Hoho. Hohoho. Fear laughed.

Raindrops finally began to fall. Standing in the rain, she looked quite delighted.

"Fear... Is that really... Fear?"

Haruaki was confused, but no one could answer his question. The instant blood spurted out from the loss of Peavey's single arm, Konoha lost consciousness.

Fear stealing rice-crackers to eat, Fear throwing a tantrum at home, Fear happily attending school. Those facial expressions compared to the current smiling face of Fear—clearly they were the same face, but different at the same time.

"Ahhhhh... Ahhhhhhhhhhh..."

With residual piteous cries, the collapsed Peavey started to move. Muttering "Damn it! Damn it!" as she righted her upper torso, she knelt as she attempted to stand up—suddenly a great amount of blood spurted from her severed shoulder, causing her to lose balance, drained of strength. Flailing her remaining arm, the massive fist struck the floor, she created new depressions as she tried to support her body that was toppling forward.

Supporting herself like a three-legged beast, Peavey raised her head. Her blonde hair obscured her eyes and virtually all of her facial expression. Nevertheless, Haruaki could still see her bloodless lips moving. Rather than screaming angrily—

She smiled.

"How dare you... How dare you rape and humiliate me?"

A chilling voice. It sounded very calm. Too calm. The tone of mockery she bore up to this point was no longer present in her laughter.

Simply... Pure laughter.

Precisely due to that, it felt even more terrifying.

She had abandoned something decisively—that was what Haruaki felt. This was this woman's limit.

Suddenly, even the smile disappeared from Peavey's face leaving her completely expressionless. She started moving once more, withdrawing her hand from the floor, blood spewing as she stood up.

"Appalling... The worst... Humiliated by... Trash... Utterly appalling..."

Only quiet mutters came continually from her lips. These words carried no emotion. Neither did those obscured eyes nor her pallid face show any emotion.

Perhaps due to the difficulty of balancing with one arm or the effects of inner turmoil, she swayed with great instability. The pale ghost with blood gushing from her shoulder—or rather, the "Balancing Toy."

Even her mutters were shaking unsteadily, nonstop.

"...I'm going to kill you, destroy you, and then violate you. Happily I will torture you to death... You are just a tool... Rusted..."

Clack! —The sound of high heels. Expressionless, the balancing toy began to walk. Her footsteps unsteady. Even so, that abnormal existence was approaching Haruaki's group step by step, muttering to herself. The sight reminded one of a poorly made horror film, presenting an unbelievable and terrifying scene.

But just as Peavey advanced a couple of steps—

A long slender strip of fabric, resembling a bandage, extended from below the school building onto the roof.

Due to its great length, only the front end was in view. The source was probably on a lower floor or on the ground. The cloth strip moved as if alive, wrapping itself around Peavey's waist, instantly lifting her body into the air. Surprised, Peavey tried to resist but due to her injuries she could only fruitlessly wave her legs.

"—!"

Then Peavey was taken away by the strip of cloth, disappearing over the railing—vanishing into the increasingly heavy rain.

Only silence remained. Silence synonymous to the sound of rain. Destruction's wake was colored garnet as if rendered as a watercolor painting.

Watching in a daze for seconds, Haruaki finally registered these surrounding elements as peace.

The enemy had left.

"Wha... What...?"

No response. Neither the cracks on the roof nor the twisted railing gave any answer. Totally beyond comprehension.

(However... At least the enemy was repelled...)

He relaxed his shoulders. The muscles of his entire body had tensed severely due to rushing in to battle without any warmup exercises.

The rain gradually increased.

His drenched uniform was becoming heavy, the fabric clinging to his arms. Only at this moment did he remember his painful wound. At the last moment, Konoha had shifted her body, thereby managing to avoid damage to bones or nerves. Nevertheless, a wound was a wound.

Hoping for the rainwater to wash away the bloodstains, Haruaki sighed.

However—he heard an unbelievable voice at this moment.

"...Mechanism No.8 breaking type, circular figure: 'Francs' Breaking Wheel'—Curse Calling!"

He instinctively shuddered and held Muramasa forward before him without thought. Thanks to his natural reflexes, the sword blocked the attack successfully.

It had blocked the attack Fear made against Haruaki.

The wheel and the sword resisted each other. Fear appeared before Haruaki with empty eyes, holding the edge of the torture tool. Giggles escaped her mouth as her gentle exhalation reached Haruaki's lips.

"Screams... I want to hear screams. I... was created for this purpose. I... that..."

"Come back to your senses! It's finished, the enemy has escaped! Fear!"

What astounding strength. Pushing the wheel hard, she gradually drew near. Haruaki desperately resisted. This caused sharp pain to flare up from his arm injury, making him lose strength. I'm going to be crushed! Just as he trembled from the thought—

"...You! What on earth are you doing?"

A terrifying roar came from the sword as it robbed Haruaki's arms of his control. At the same time as deflecting the wheel, Konoha's black scabbard struck Fear and sent her flying.

Lying on the concrete, completely drenched by rainwater, Fear remained motionless for a quite a while. After a few seconds passed, the chain of cubes extending from her hand vanished while the torture tool connected the chain returned to its original form as a Rubik's cube.

"Aha... Ahahaha..."

Her laughter sounded slightly convulsive, but Haruaki knew. Fear had returned.

Slowly, she got up. Quietly restraining herself, her drenched hair sticking to her cheeks as she stood in the same spot with a blank expression. Suddenly she raised her arm:

"...Rain? This is also a first. Really... So it turns out to be this cold. Haha, with this, my body—as well as my face, isn't everything all wet now...?"

As always, she seemed to be trying to hide something and muddle through. But she could not possibly muddle through this time. Haruaki was just about to lecture her in vexation when she spoke out first:

"...Do you understand now? I wanted to know my true nature, so this is it."

Her back turned to Haruaki, her voice sounded rather delicate and sad.

"Haruaki. How will you treat me now? That woman is completely correct. I've murdered hundreds, and I was created for the purpose of killing in this manner. Because of that, these hands and this self is cursed. Repeatedly cursed. But ironically, I finally obtained human consciousness as a result of endless curses, only to realize the concept of guilt."

"...A common thing."

"A common thing? Ha, really? I am self-aware. Speaking of guilt, I feel like I am the worst and most abysmal tool. Ah yes, right, Haruaki, I was really relieved to learn about your constitution. Immunity to the curses of cursed tools—that had been my greatest fear before coming here. I did mention, right? My curse is simply 'a common thing'... It causes the owner to go mad, compelled to use me without any self-restraint. No matter how virtuous or noble, as long as I come into their possession, they all become like my first owner... Like that murderous maniac of a castle lord. Using me

to seek pleasure, interrogating and torturing others... An existence of this sort, what else could you call it other than irredeemably sinful?"

"Hence—I said there's no problem! This doesn't matter, right? Because it doesn't affect me! Since this is a matter of constitution, it won't change in the future, so you can rest assured!"

Haruaki tried to sound as cheerful as possible, but Fear shook her head in disagreement.

"No. Recalling the past, recalling that I am still me—I have realized the most fundamental problem. I strove to pursue hopes and dreams, but never did I think about how stupid it was. I tried to forget, to pretend things never happened. But clearly it's impossible!"

"Fear, calm down! What are you talking about?"

In response to this question, more questions were raised in quick succession:

"I am guilty. Guilty of murdering too many people. Which is why I am cursed with guilt. So what about punishment? What should the punishment be?"

Everyone was silent for a moment. Only the pitter-patter of rain could be heard, singing a noisy song.

Fear quietly turned her head, orienting her dripping wet face towards Haruaki—asking in a trembling voice:

"Hey... For me, is finding absolution possible? The curse this body suffers from... Will I be able to forget it?"

Haruaki was silent. Because there was no need to answer, he had no obligation to answer, he did not want to answer, and furthermore, it was a question with no answer. He knew it was underhanded of him to do this, but he still offered a smile as an answer.

"Let's go home, it's too cold here."

The underhanded plea did not reach her heart. Because she was too clever.

Looking rather happy, but also very lonely—Fear also returned a smile.

"This answer is so gentle... So very gentle, but it's the worst."

Once again, she turned around and stepped forward, murmuring extremely quietly as if to herself:

"I was very happy. The rice-crackers were very tasty. By the way, this school, this home, all treated me so kindly... But in the end, I don't belong here."

"Wait... Fear! Wait a minute, you—!"

Haruaki reached out towards the hand that could not be reached, but even then she did not look back.

"...What happened just now has steeled my determination. By now, I almost added another unforgivable crime to my repertoire. Rather than having things this way—it's better for me to sleep alone the way I was until recently. So I must go. I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you."

The drenched silver hair jumped up high.

Fear went over the railing, disappearing into the rain.

Part 8

Collapsing on the roof staircase, Haruaki pondered.

What would have been the correct answer? What would have been the right thing to do?

"Wait a minute, I'll bandage and give you first aid immediately!"

Konoha controlled Haruaki's hands currently, slicing off the lower hem of his uniform for makeshift bandages. Then she returned to human form and began to bandage Haruaki's wound. The bleeding had essentially stopped, so there was no worry that she would faint again.

Rather than sharp pain, an ambiguous sense of heat and pain could be felt from his arm. Perhaps his drenched body was reeling from the cold, the sense of heat seemed to be spreading thinly throughout the body like a film of oil, finally settling in the depths of his mind.

"Done. Are you okay?"

"Yes... It doesn't hurt much. Probably because you avoided a critical hit. Thank you."

"I don't think it's anything serious, but you should still get examined at a hospital. Or rather, I am ordering you in the form of a suggestion... We're going to the hospital, right?"

Haruaki did not answer. He stared straight at Konoha through her glasses at extremely close range, but he did not answer.

"You're not going... Is that what you want to say?"

"If that's the case, what are you going to do?"

"Then even someone like me will get angry. You have to take care of your own health."

Haruaki silently lowered his gaze. Konoha narrowed her eyes with displeasure:

"You're going to chase after that child, isn't that what you're planning to do? She left by her own will! Besides, that woman only lost an arm, but she doesn't look like she'll give up... She'll probably come again. Given the fact her life is being targeted, I think running away is actually not a bad decision."

These words weighed heavily in Haruaki's heart.

What was the answer Fear sought? If he had answered correctly, would she not have left? Who knew—even now, there was still no solution. Even if he chased after and found her, then what? If he said the wrong thing again, things would simply repeat again.

Plus the meaning behind "Running away is actually not a bad decision"... Even if Fear was brought back, dealing with the enemy from here on was also a problem. Undoubtedly, that woman named Peavey was an enemy. Most terrifying of all, she really carried murderous intent. The murderous intent to destroy cursed tools and anyone in her way. Even if Fear came back, how could Peavey be convinced to give up? Who knows.

However.

"She said... 'It's better for me to sleep alone.'"

"Eh?"

"That girl... She's not running away. Instead, she chose to terminate things in a more terrible manner. That's why..."

Gazing into Konoha's eyes, he pondered how to convince her. As the sense of heat clouded his thinking—

There was only one conclusion. It could not be helped. Because it could not be helped, he could only ask in this manner.

"I beg you, this is my one and only wish of a lifetime, Kono-nee!"

Konoha instantly drew a deep breath in surprise, then sighed as if exhausted.

"...So unfair, didn't you promise never to call me that again? We're already going to high school together."

As if relishing being scolded, Haruaki deliberately giggled.

"Ever since a long time ago, whenever I begged in this manner... You never refused me, right? Even if you fumed angrily and kept complaining nonstop, in the end—you'd always help me."

"Who knows!"

Konoha turned her face away. Was she hiding embarrassment? Haruaki thought to himself.

"Are you troubled?"

"...I am troubled. Really."

"To be frank—something else also troubles me, but I don't know if I should voice it."

"Wh-What is it? You're in pain after all, right? Oh no, you have to immediately—"

"That's not it. How should I put it... That..."

"That?"

"S... P..."

Haruaki muttered unintelligibly.

"SP? Is that some kind of acronym? Sonic punch?"

"Yeah, you could think of it as an acronym. Regarding something on a similar level of destructive power."

What does sonic punch have to do with anything? —As Konoha puzzled, she casually punched the air. Rather than producing slicing wind or sonic booms, the resulting sound effect was "boing." Realizing this, Konoha lowered her gaze mechanically as if her neck was fitted with some kind of switch. In actual fact, Haruaki had been desperately keeping his gaze on Konoha's face all this time, but he almost followed her downward shifting gaze. Frantically, he closed his eyes—

"In other words, stop parading naked!"

"You should've told me earlier—!"



Almost bursting into tears, Konoha ran out to the roof through the pouring rain. She must have gone to retrieve her uniform.

What should he do next? Haruaki pondered gloomily. A few minutes later, the sound of splashing footsteps entering the roof door could be heard. Konoha came to Haruaki as he sat on the floor, wringing water out from her drenched uniform.

"...I am simply musing to myself. I was thinking, that child probably failed to understand a rather obvious truth. When clearly it is so simple a matter."

"What do you mean?"

"Iyaah, are my musings being overheard?"

Saying that deliberately, she smiled and continued:

"Since you overheard, it can't be helped. This is the hint to the answer—regarding guilt and curses, etc—to her question. Perhaps you can treat it as the answer to the question, 'What could you do once you catch up to her?'"

Konoha watched Haruaki with her head tilted.

"Simply stated—I never asked Haruaki for an answer."

"...Huh?"

"That child is the same as me. I used to ponder the same question, and even now I still ponder—but although I've yet to find the answer, I continue to stay in Haruaki's home. What does this mean? ...End of my musings."

Haruaki could get a vague sense of the meaning behind her words. In other words—

Whether the curse could be lifted or not, was irrelevant to the question of staying in that home.

Instead, what mattered was... Once he found Fear, he should say—

What he needed to do turned out to be simpler than imagined. His lips naturally smiled.

"W-What are you smiling about?"

"Nothing, nothing much."

As expected, begging Konoha in that manner really worked—Haruaki thought to himself as he stood up.

"Great! So now, let us go experience the true meaning of youth!"

"Youth?"

"Running a marathon under pouring rain is something that belongs exclusively to days of youth, right? It seems like it will serve as a glorious memory of high school days! So, could the lady over there please assist me in making these memories? No no no, it's not going to take too much of your time. That little girl's conspicuous silver shiny head is our goal, it will be very simple!"

"Making memories eh... Sigh—In that case, it can't be helped."

Like an exasperated older sister unable to refuse the whims of a willful little brother, Konoha smiled wryly and sighed.

Chapter 3 - Antinomy of Each Other's Body Temperatures / "Cold curse, Warm curse"

Part 1

Rusted industrial machinery stood upright like some kind of monster. The air was rife with the smell of rust and mold. On the other side of the high ceiling, the sound of countless raindrops dancing could be heard.

In the corner of an abandoned factory, Peavey's silhouette could be found. Her upper torso naked, she was covered below the waist by a brand new blanket. Nevertheless, the bleeding from her shoulder made newness irrelevant.

"...«Chupacabra Bandage»."

That thing—the dangling bandage moved and inexplicably wrapped itself around Peavey's shoulder.

"Oooh? Aaaaaaaah...?"

Peavey's body twisted in suffering as a result of the extreme intensity of the pain. The portion of the bandage in contact with the wound was writhing restlessly. Contracting, sucking away. No mistake, it acted as if it were alive—sucking blood. As if struck by electrical shock, Peavey's body jumped. But seconds later, she endured the pain as she breathed irregularly, peering through her blonde hair to glare at the figure standing before her.

"What joke is this... What are you do—"

"...Yes, it should have sucked to its fill now."

Unintimidated by her anger, the girl responded without hostility. Stopping herself from pouncing forward, Peavey glanced at her own shoulder. She could tell that the shoulder's pain was subsiding. Not only the pain caused by the strange bandage but also the pain intrinsic to the amputation wound.

"No matter what kind of critical wound, Chupacabra Bandage can stop the bleeding. But because this thing is alive, it feeds on blood the instant it wraps around the wound, accompanied by intense pain. Simply stated, one has to endure suffering while it sucks its fill. Once it is full, the pain will

disappear temporarily. For the sake of closing a critical wound, one is forced to savor pain—that is this bandage's..."

The strip of fabric extending toward Peavey severed itself, and the remainder retracted.

"...Curse."

"Auxiliary..."

The figure nodded in acknowledgement and murmured softly:

"This place is one of the hiding places we arranged. In your current state, there was no way to send you to the hotel, but left alone you would have died. Hence you were taken here for emergency treatment. I apologize for lacking the opportunity to explain until now."

Who knew if Peavey was actually listening as she used her remaining iron arm to punch the bloodstained blanket as she stood up unsteadily.

"...It's better if you stay still. Although the bleeding has stopped, your physical energy has yet to recover."

"You must be joking! Why act without my consent! I can still fight! That stinking rubbish of a tool! I must defeat her at all costs..."

"Certainly, because that is the mission, its destruction is imperative. Nevertheless, at that particular point in time, I judged you as incapable of achieving it."

Chupacabra Bandage once again extended out from the mantle, its front end striking Peavey's bare chest. Knocked out of balance, Peavey fell and sat down on the dirty blanket once more.

"Tsk..."

"The job of an auxiliary is to provide full support to the knights on the front lines. From this standpoint, that is all I can do. I firmly believe I made the right decision."

Peavey glared at the girl's eye beneath the depths of the hood. The girl remained calmly composed, completely unfazed.

"Fighting under conditions of uncertain victory would simply result in a wasteful sacrifice—that would be troublesome for me, for it would be seen as my failure as an auxiliary to judge the situation properly."

The aloof attitude persisted for minutes with no signs of changing, causing Peavey to give up in the end. She sighed and sat down properly, dangled her arm to the floor and took off her armor. Then using her exposed hand to open a retractable compartment on the armor, she took out a cigarette and lit it, inhaling the smoke deeply into her lungs—slowly, slowly, as if performing deep breathing.

As she inhaled and exhaled, her abandoned emotions began to return slowly. Her sanity defrosting, light returned to her soulless eyes as a sardonic smile appeared on her lips.

Raising her head up to examine the figure before her, she scooped up her blonde hair and spoke with displeasure.

"Hoo... And here I was, wondering what kind of auxiliary I had, who could have expected a single little child like this. Far I have truly fallen, to be lectured by this kind of child."

"Regarding the description of 'little child,' I must voice my objections. As for 'a single,' that I can only explain to you thus: it is inevitable given the circumstances. Due to the suddenness of the mission, there was no time to organize an army."

"Yes yes, I know. In any case, I was the only one free to be sent to this place, and you are the only one to support me. The Knights' Dominion lacks in manpower, this cannot be helped. I have not a single complaint for our lord... By the way, girl, can you tell me your name?"

In that instant, as if she were struck by an unexpected impact, her hood began to sway lightly from side to side.

"...Hmm, there is no need. Just call me 'Mummy Maker.'"

"How utilitarian a child you are. Fine. My name is—"

"I already know."

Mummy Maker's hand began rustle as it moved beneath the mantle. After a long while, a bandaged hand emerged from under the mantle, holding out an object resembling a small stack of flashcards. She spoke as she flipped through them:

"Peavey Barowoi. Female. Twenty-one years old. Unmarried. Blonde-haired. Rank: Orthodox Knight, First Class. A rare knight who does

not rely on Wathes to fight on the frontlines. Likes: cigarettes, black pepper steak, white wine..."

"Are my three-sizes written there?"

"Three-sizes are... Yes..."

"I didn't ask you to read them out. I was being sarcastic."

Peavey puffed out smoke. The reason of her displeasure was not because she was forcefully withdrawn from the fight.

"If 'Hates' or 'Special Characteristics' are written there, why don't you read it out?"

"Note: her hatred and revulsion towards Wathes is especially outstanding amongst the knights. Hates: all Wathes."

"Especially long and slender Wathes, they repulse me so much it makes me shudder!"

Peavey glared with revulsion at the bandage wrapped around her shoulder.

"...Are you blaming me for using Chupacabra Bandage?"

"That's only half the reason."

"And the other half is...? Other than this I had no other recourse. Had I explained to you first, surely you would have refused. I already considered it beforehand."

"That is not the reason. I understand very well this was the only way to close this wound, so I'll concede and overlook the fact. Besides, it's already bandaged, this is all in the past. However—the problem is the present."

The present? Mummy Maker inclined her head in puzzlement, her movements as girl-like as her voice. Peavey's sharp glare persisted.

"Take that thing off and show me your appearance."

"...Only if there is such a need."

Mummy Maker pulled her mantle back and the hood fell on her shoulders to reveal herself as a white-haired girl, age fifteen or so. Instead of wearing clothes, her entire body was wrapped in bandages, even one of her eyes.

"Oh my, isn't that an adorable face?"

"...Hmm, no such thing..."

"In any case, those things wrapped around your body, which ones belong to Chupacabra Bandage?"

"Almost all of them. Except for the face."

Almost all of them eh—Peavey's face expressed mockery.

"Then take them off."

"!!!"

"Did you hear me? Take them off. This thing on my shoulder cannot be helped, but as much as possible, I do not want any Wathe to enter my sight. Even if a Wathe exists nearby I will feel uncomfortable. Take them off and throw them away as far as you can, somewhere out of my sight. Treat this as your obligation, at least when you're speaking with me."

"...What if I refuse?"

"Then you have failed as an auxiliary to accommodate and support the knight. That would be my conclusion. From then on, I will neither accept nor permit your assistance. You could return to the Knights' Dominion."

"Underneath this... Nothing is worn..."

"It does not matter."

"My body... Is very ugly, with burn scars..."

"It does not matter."

Finding Peavey's serious expression unchanged, the girl sighed briefly. Slowly she went to work, directing the ends of the bandages to move behind the nearby abandoned machinery. The sound of wrapping around some kind of object could be heard. At the same time, the bandages around her started to wind towards that direction with a rustling sound.

After that, what remained was the pale white body of a girl of whiteness.

She continued to maintain her sense of aloofness that matched neither her voice nor her age. Expressionless, she stood there—just as she had claimed, her body was covered with large patches of burn scars, now

completely laid bare. But apparently she was not without emotion, for faint blushing appeared on her cheeks.

"...Hmm. Like this, is it okay...?"

"Yes, this is fine."

"So embarrassing."



"There is nothing to be embarrassed about. Isn't my chest exposed too? Besides—"

Peavey held a cigarette in her mouth as she walked over to the girl's side, staring at her body tactlessly.

"Yes, I knew it. What were you saying... Very ugly? Nonsense!"

"—Eh?"

Mummy Maker raised her head with surprise. Peavey easily deduced that she must have some kind of mental trauma and sad past. Hence, rather than jeering she was smiling. Amongst the Knights' Dominion, there were many who regarded Peavey as a mad dog.

Seeing the girl display the mettle to express her opinion directly to someone of such a reputation, Peavey was greatly pleased.

"In my view, Wathes are what are truly ugly. In that case, having removed that kind of thing, how could your body be ugly? Burn scars are insignificant."

"...Liar."

"I'm not lying. This aspect of yours is rather fitting for your age."

Peavey spoke as she extended a hand to caress the girl's head. This act caused Mummy Maker to act even stranger. As her eyes flashed and turned upwards, her body shuddered slightly.

"What's wrong? Ah yes, you dislike having your head touched, is that it? My apologies..."

Just as Peavey was about to withdraw her hand, Mummy Maker shook her head hurriedly.

"No... No! It is... The opposite...!"

"Opposite?"

"Up until now, no one had ever touched my head, so... I, am very happy..."

"Don't parents usually rub their child's head?"

"—No. My parents never did..."

The girl gloomily looked down at her burns and did not finish her sentence.

Peavey narrowed her eyes. She also recalled—her own parents who had died from Wathes.

"Well, there are many kinds of parents after all... Fine, what should I do? If you wish, I can continue rubbing?"

Although she meant it as a joke, the girl seemed to have taken it seriously. Shyly she lowered her head and drew in her shoulders, hesitating for quite a while before finally murmuring:

"If you don't find it troublesome... Then... A little longer..."

Peavey was quite surprised but since she had made the offer, there was no other choice but to continue caressing the girl's head. This sort of intimacy, which did not suit a first encounter, gave her a rather incredible feeling.

As she continued to rub, Peavey rested the girl's forehead against her stomach. The girl's face was out of sight.

(A surrogate mother... That doesn't really suit my style... But fine, once in a while feels not bad at all.)

At this time she suddenly recalled:

"Even though I asked you to take off the bandages, you are not required to continue showing me your naked body, you know? If you feel embarrassed, feel free to wear your mantle."

"...Yes."

Part 2

By pure coincidence, Ueno Kirika met the girl in front of the cram school. After lessons ended, she walked out of the building and immediately saw her—just as she was frowning at the rain falling from the night sky as she opened her umbrella, a silver figure walked past before her.

The girl's appearance was quite strange. Still wearing her school uniform, she did not carry an umbrella and allowed her silver hair to be completely drenched. Her gaze directed towards her feet, she walked listlessly.

Even though she only took care of the girl for one day, being the class rep—no, regardless of her identity, she could not leave her alone.

She hated rain and, in particular, being drenched by it. Whenever she saw boys getting excited to see wet uniforms turning transparent, she wished she could eliminate them all from the world. Running in the rain was suicidal, but she had no choice but to abandon this principle of hers. Simply using her umbrella to prevent rain from splattering on her directly, she broke into a light run in pursuit of the figure.

"Fear-kun...! Hey, Fear-kun! What is going on? Why are you here?"

The girl did not respond to her calls and simply continued walking in a daze—judging the situation to be abnormal, Kirika forcefully pulled her into an small alley. Only then did she look up with a blank expression—

"...Ki-ri-ka...?"

"...Yes, Ueno Kirika, the class representative of Yachi's class. Didn't we meet during the day? Seriously, what happened? Walking in the rain without an umbrella, that is absolutely ridiculous! Where are you going?"

"Where am I going... Yes, I have to go where..."

She murmured with her eyes out of focus. Just as Kirika frowned in surprise—

"Oh? Hey girls, you're completely drenched!"

"Where are you girls going? How about we share umbrellas? Or why don't we simply find a place to shelter from the rain? We'll treat you!"

A bunch of frivolous men. Now was not the time to get involved with them.

"Please don't interfere, this is none of your business!"

"...Huh? We are just offering our kindness, what is with that attitude?"

Kirika's original manner of speaking was already different from most girls. Combined with her impatient tone of voice, her words sounded especially offensive. As a result, the two men's attitude instantly changed.

Troublesome things again—Kirika frowned, causing the men to be even more displeased. By this point, apologizing would only make things worse.

As Kirika began to ponder, whether it would be faster to simply run away and drag Fear along, at this moment—

"...Too noisy..."

A voice came from behind her.

"Too noisy... The only noise needed are screams... Screams...? Yes, screams..."

"Too noisy? Girl, you think we're too noisy?"

Before Kirika could interfere, one of the men reached out towards Fear.

Then Kirika saw it. The Rubik's Cube held in the silver-haired girl's hand.

The toy instantly transformed into a long-shafted tool. With merely a light sweep, Fear sent the man flying away. Smashing into the wall with a frightful sound, the man fainted.

"What...! F-Fear-kun, what on earth is this...?"

"Y-You girl... What have you done?"

As Kirika watched in shock, Fear moved past her and came before the other man. Without any pretense she made a forward thrust with the spiral weapon. The man tried to escape but slipped and fell on his butt—the spiral weapon embedded itself into the wall, mere centimeters above his head. As it dug through the steel-reinforced concrete, debris fell onto the man's head.

"Eek..?"

"Behold, Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator». This is me. Another me. This form measures 178.7cm. Number of times used: 357 or 358. In one case, a person died from shock at the very sight of this, a very young boy..."

Fear's gaze remained extremely hollow all this time. She was having a dream. A nightmare that could not be called a dream. While mutters continually came from her throat, her arm moved as if heeding the calls from a sea of darkness. Retracting her weapon from the concrete, she lowered the tip slightly, pointing it at the man sitting on the ground.

"...What is the purpose of my existence? Why do I exist? To gouge, to drill, to perforate! Hence, I-I..."

"Fear-kun! This is going too far!"

Kirika hugged Fear's arm tightly. As if she had been hoping to be restrained from the very start, the girl instantly stood motionless.

"You there—Run! Hurry and run!"

"Eh! Ah! Yaaah..."

Leaving behind his friend and umbrella, the man scrambled and scurried away.

Kirika felt a chill along her spine, even colder than the rainwater. She saw at this time that the vicious weapon had transformed back to a cube shape. Noticing Fear relaxing, Kirika let her go, but Fear began to look lifeless once again.

"Fear...-kun?"

"Ah, haha... Useless, I knew it..."

Slowly she turned her gaze up towards the dark sky, her expression obscured by the silver hair over her face.

"This is my first experience of rain. Yet all I can think about are memories from the past. Someone like me, where should I go... Haha, right, of course there is only that place. Ending things at the place I saw for the first time... Would not be bad. Not bad..."

The silver-haired girl started walking again, leaving behind Kirika who was powerless to do anything.

As the sight of her back was lost in the dark streets, her mutterings gradually faded into the distance.

Suddenly no longer hearing that weak voice, Kirika instantly became confused.

Were the girl's shoulders trembling because she was laughing, or was it—

Part 3

"Any sign of her?"

"No good... Can't find her anywhere."

At the meeting place—the plaza before the station, Haruaki and Konoha were looking at each other, out of breath. The sky had completely darkened and pedestrians walking before the station were sparse and few

in between. In contrast, only the rain poured harder and harder, rendering the vinyl umbrellas they had bought at a convenience store useless.

Parks, alleys, gaming centers, department stores, behind buildings... They checked place after place for where Fear could be but failed to find any trace of her.

"Damn it, where did she go? She has no money so trains and buses are out of the question. She couldn't have gone far."

"It's not like there are no channels of obtaining money... But I don't really think she would go that far?"

"I'm quite sure her mind is not messed up enough to rob money from pedestrians. No, more fundamentally, she probably doesn't even know how to take a bus or a train. There shouldn't be any problems there. Anyway, let's continue searching—"

Just as they were about to start walking again—

A lively ringtone was heard from the cellphone in the chest pocket. Who could it be at such a busy time? Haruaki was planning to ignore it but—the ringing continued nonstop. Glancing at the caller's ID, he gave up and took the call.

"Class Rep? Sorry, I'm really busy right now, could we talk next time—"

'I saw Fear-kun!'

Haruaki frantically withdrew his finger that was about to press the end call button. Motioning to Konoha with a glance, he indicated it was an important call.

"W-Where? Please tell me, we are trying to find her!"

'—Just as I expected. No... Sorry, she was with me a short while ago but I lost her. Because she looked very strange, I decided to contact you to let you know.'

"I see... Wait, did anything happen to you? That girl is a little emotionally unstable right now—"

A moment of silence. Then—

'I myself am fine.'

Catching the implication of her words, Haruaki's spine stiffened.

'No... Nothing serious. Even the people apart from me. However, how should I put it... She is very confused. Yes, I don't know how I should explain it—perhaps you might think I am absolutely ridiculous, that... I saw something unbelievable! Fear-kun, Fear-kun was holding this Rubik's Cube—'

"Class Rep."

Haruaki swallowed hard. Amongst the acquaintances of his father, there were people who knew about the existence of cursed tools. The school superintendent was one such person, which was how a special case like Konoha was able to obtain a student's identity—But this was the first time Haruaki met someone in his own circle who had encountered cursed tools.

"I am sorry, but I will explain once everything settles. Can you forget this incident for now?"

'What are you saying?'

"I know this is unreasonable of me, but it is hard to explain right now..."

'...'

"I beg you, Class Rep, now is not the time for explanations, I must find Fear!"

After a period which felt like forever to him, Haruaki finally heard a sigh.

'...It can't be helped, you seem to facing difficulties of your own.'

"T-Thank you! Also, please don't tell anyone else—"

As soon as Haruaki finished, he heard a clearly angry response.

'Absolutely ridiculous! Do you really believe I am the type of idiotic woman who goes around spilling other people's secrets for fun?! Besides, I already know you have your difficulties!'

"Owah... S-Sorry! That's not what I meant!"

'Never mind. So, where would Fear-kun go, do you have some idea?'

"That's exactly why I'm in a bind. Class Rep, did that girl say anything?"

'I wasn't able to converse with her much... Hmm? No, she did say something towards the end...'

"What did she say? Tell me!"

'Right! I recall she said... "Ending things at the place I saw for the first time... Would not be bad"... Something like that.'

The first time? Ending things? The place... She saw for the first time, and for ending things?

Haruaki's mental circuits connected instantly, recalling what happened this morning. While watching television, Fear had expressed dramatic interest towards a certain place.

"—The sea!"

Kirika was still talking but Haruaki shut his phone, tossed his umbrella and broke into a run. Watching him splashing as he ran, Konoha silently sighed and also threw away her umbrella.

Part 4

The night sea seemed far darker than what she had seen earlier on television, and far more terrifying. As countless raindrops splattered across the surface of the sea, the continued noise filled the air.

The wave breaker stretched ahead into the distant sea. The faraway beach was littered with rocky shores. No matter how curious, no one would probably come here for a swim. Even fishermen would have no way of seeing to the depths of the sea. For years, decades, or even eternity—a vast secret room lay beneath where people's gazes would not venture.

Fear walked towards the furthest end of the wave breaker. Accompanied by the rhythm of the rain, the complex sounds of mingling waves felt even more intimidating. Taking a deep breath, the fishy smell of the rocks filled her lungs. The sensation was fresh and novel, was this the taste of saltwater? Was this the taste of fish? Questions suddenly surfaced. She felt the urge to ask the person who appeared in her mind, however... That person was not by her side, and they will likely never meet again.

Fear smiled lightly—she still could not sever her attachments.

Gazing at the darkness extending before her eyes, it really looked limitless. The horizon which should be there was not visible, for the sky and the sea were equally pitch black. Why would she feel this sense of longing? But she knew the reason.

As she stood on the edge of the wave breaker, she was completely drenched by the splashing waves and the rainwater.

"Don't be impatient, I will go now..."

Muttering to herself, she prepared to take the last step—But just at this very moment.

She heard a voice. A voice calling her name.

Not Fear-in-Cube but the name she had taken provisionally, the one whose meaning she did not even understand, her name here.

"Ho... Idiot. Seriously, what an idiot. Why did he have to come..."

Smiling wryly she turned her head.

There was no one.

All she could see was the wave breaker, splattered by the rain. Only the icy-cold water stretching into the distance.

It must be her feelings of attachment.

A hallucination.

Unable to suppress the urge, Fear began to laugh in her current posture with her head still turned back.

"Ha... Ha... Aha... Ahahaha... How I wish to defy fate! But I did try to kill that guy! I almost added another to my crimes! He couldn't possibly have come after me! Haha... Even if he really chased behind me, the gods could not possibly allow him to arrive here! Because—I am—cursed! Ahahahahahahaha!"

Then her laughter stopped suddenly. She was truly pathetic, hence she resolved herself.

She was cursed. Hence, it was not allowed.

As she murmured softly, she leaned her weight backwards, slowly reclining her body.

She could see the sky as rain poured down from it. There was a comfortable sense of floating. Embraced by water from all directions, her body gradually sank. Keeping her arms and legs spread out, she let gravity guide her to the bed prepared for her at the bottom of the sea.

Her back could feel the sensation of sand. This was the place of her eternal slumber—she thought.

Nothing could be seen. So very dark.

There was nothing in the surroundings. So very cold.

Ah—expelling her last breath as a bubble, Fear closed her eyes.

Nothing to see. A cold, dark place. This was exactly the same as the underground dungeon beneath that castle.

I ended up there again? How fitting. If only I never left in the first place. Only because I went out, did something like this happen. Only because I tasted the edges of warmth, did something like this happen.

I am just returning to where I was originally, clearly when that is all this is, but for some reason—

—Compared to before, it felt even more lonely.

Part 5

Staying in the cold abandoned factory was no help in recovering one's energy. Through the use of a rather unsightly manner—namely, using Chupacabra Bandage as a rope, Mummy Maker returned to her base—the room at the hotel.

Fortunately, the one who objected to this method of transport was currently sleeping behind her. As the embarrassing act continued, she left the message "I will rest for a while, I leave things to you" and simply went to sleep. Due to the difference in body size, moving her did take quite a bit of work.

Mummy Maker lightly laid Peavey down on the soft bed in the hotel suite. Although she felt that the armor worn on Peavey's arm was in the way, she had no idea how to remove it and could only leave it there.

As the covers were pulled over Peavey, seductive breathing noises could be heard from her sleep.

She must be quite relieved now—Mummy Maker felt a mysterious sense of warmth in her heart as if a fire had been lit. At the same time, she recalled the weight of the hand rubbing her head dozens of minutes earlier.

That was her first time. Not beaten but to have her head rubbed by someone. Not pulled roughly but to have her hair gently caressed. Standing so close together, hearing voices that were not scolds. Experiencing for the very first time, that all this could be so pleasurable.

Asking a woman she met the first time to spoil her, even Mummy Maker was surprised at her own behavior. However—why? —She could not restrain herself, as soon as she wondered whether or not she would have such a chance in the future.

Simply recalling the memory filled her heart with happiness. Dreamily, dreamily. It was as if her memories were washing away. The memories of her parents locking her in a closet, setting fire to it in hopes of obtaining insurance money, thus resulting in her near-fatal wounds and the loss of one eye.

She watched Peavey's sleeping face. The face of someone who should simply be a colleague.

Was she looking for a surrogate mother here?

Never experienced an ideal mother's touch, was she projecting her desires onto Peavey now?

It must be. That blonde hair, those heavily scarred hands which could not be called beautiful, that smell of tobacco... All these were identical to the mother who had tried to kill her. Hence, this person who was not her mother resembled her mother all the same. This was mistaken escapism, an act of substitution, she understood. Even though she understood—she could not suppress her feelings of tenderness. All she wanted to do now was continue watching that sleeping face forever.

But sooner or later, Peavey was heading towards death. Having lost an arm, her combat ability was severely compromised. But she did not care about that and intended to fight with nothing but pride as her weapon. How worrying.

Mummy Maker noticed the notions surfacing in her mind.

—Wishing Peavey could stay.

—Hoping she would not die.

—Wanting her to stay longer.

—Well then, what could be done?

A knight like her would definitely not listen to pleas asking her not to fight. As her auxiliary, such a suggestion was not permitted either. Even if a plan was come up to prevent her from fighting—such as asking the Knights' Dominion to send reinforcements or a substitute candidate, Peavey would probably ignore orders and go forth to fight alone. Hence, rather than trying to stop her from fighting, Mummy Maker needed a way to allow her to fight in safer manner.

Assist Peavey in battle? Rejected. She would only be a hindrance. That was why she became an auxiliary in the first place.

Then what other ways were there—she thought to herself—and finally an idea occurred to her.

The orders issued by the Knights' Dominion were to "Destroy Fear-in-Cube," nothing more.

Exterminating the Japanese sword and Yachi's family was not part of the mission. Even though letting them go would surely result in a scolding, it would not be grounds for punishment. If necessary, they could simply send another knight.

In that case, there were options open to her.

Even though it might prove futile, it was better than doing nothing—

Plans crystallized in her mind. The only condition was it had to be carried out in secret. Surely, even a plan of this level would incur the displeasure of Peavey? After all, this was merely her own willfulness.

If it were to be done, it had to be put into action while Peavey was asleep.

Once again, Mummy Maker turned to watch Peavey's sleeping face. Suddenly, a mischievous urge occurred to her as she tried to caress that blonde hair. Then—

"Hoho, are you trying to take revenge on me?"

Half opening her eyes, Peavey teased. Mummy Maker frantically withdrew her hand.

"...No, nothing much, I just... Felt like trying once... That's all."

Pulling her hood tight she hid her face. How embarrassing.

"Continue and sleep peacefully. I will go out to scout for a bit."

"Oh my, how diligent in your work."

Mummy Maker turned around. Just as she was about to step out of the room, she heard a voice from behind:

"Beware and take care."

These were also words she had never heard before.

Without noticing, she began to break into a light run.

As soon as Mummy Maker left the room, Peavey entered light sleep once more.

Her first priority was to rest and recover her body and spirit.

Her spirit was fine. It was always fine at any given moment. She will definitely destroy those stinking tools. Definitely, definitely, definitely.

What about the body, then? —She pondered.

An injured body, an exhausted body, and unfortunately, a body whose bleeding had been staunch by a contemptible Wathe.

Then she realized. Truly, it was too contemptible.

Having lost an arm, prevailing against two Wathes without a plan would pose quite a challenge.

What could she do? She no longer cared about image. Trash must be cleaned out as soon as possible. Although a minimum amount of rest was necessary, staying out for too long would be akin to forfeiting the match. She was still about to fight, even alone she could still fight. The dishonor of losing to a mere tool would be an insult amongst insults. She had to think of a plan, she had no choice but to come up with a plan—

Even if it meant resorting to a method that disgusted her so much she would vomit—a plan that her earlier self would have mocked and ridiculed a few hours ago. Had someone suggested this to her, she would have instantly considered them fallen to the level of lowly insects, but now, even such a way of doing things—

That is right, she had already thought of the way. The question was whether she would actually choose to use it.

Motion. Rejected. Motion. Rejected. Motion. Rejected—motions with identical content and their rejection. Every member of support personnel had their own pride and mission. Risking everything at their disposal, they repeatedly made decisions of tradeoff.

Once she reached her conclusion, she fell into deep sleep.

To replace the arm she had lost, a most contemptible arm finally reached out towards the most despicable solution.

Part 6

Bathed under the pouring rain that flew sideways from the wind, Haruaki and Konoha finally arrived at the shore on the south side of town. Nevertheless there were still no signs of Fear. Trying to ward off ominous premonitions, they ran along the road which followed the shoreline. From ahead, a car slowly approached with its headlights lit up. One would have expected it to simply pass by but—

"Hey wait, you two... Are you searching for someone? If not, then never mind."

"Did you see anyone? Uh, we... Yes—we are searching for someone, a foreign girl with silver hair!"

As expected—the man in the driver's seat and the woman beside him looked at each other.

"You did see her?"

"Ah yes. Roughly ten minutes ago... She was walking ahead of here listlessly as we passed her by. She wasn't even carrying an umbrella and looked quite strange. We felt concerned so we turned back to look for her just now... But couldn't find her."

"Ahead of here... If I remember right, it's a dead end...?"

"That's why we felt troubled. What should we do? Should we call the police?"

"A-Ah yes—No no, there's no need! We were just playing some sort of punishment game... I think she probably went to hide somewhere! Really, that child, always acting out excessively... That's right, acting out excessively! Ahahahaha..."

Behind Haruaki, Konoha made a fake diplomatic smile and tried to smooth things over. What, it turns out to be something like this—the man forced a smile.

"That's right! How could something so terrible happen in real life... Really, this kind of shock is bad for the heart. You guys shouldn't play such dangerous punishment games. We almost called the police!"

"Yes, that's true, you are completely right... Sorry! Then we'll be on our way!"

They were finally near their goal. Haruaki and Konoha ran towards the direction where the car came from. Beside them, the beach gave way to a rocky shore. As they passed through the windbreak plantation, they quickened their pace as they made sure there were no signs of people. The road narrowed and as they ran, the paved path disappeared. At the end of that small path, the endpoint—was a vast space with only minimal street lighting.

The sea lay ahead with tall cliffs on the right. On the left, the rocky shore ended here with the wave breaker extending perpendicularly towards the sea.

This was all there was. All that could be seen was this.

"...Not here..."

Haruaki walked unsteadily onto the wave breaker. No one, there was no one there, only the sea.

"...Why...?"

The answer was simple, but he refused to believe it. If there was only the sea here—then it meant she was somewhere in the sea.

Somewhere in this vast expanse of water.

At the front end of the wave breaker, Haruaki collapsed on the ground.

The rain was so noisy. The sounds around him suddenly changed.

"Haruaki..."

He was unable to respond to this voice. Clenching his fist, he gritted his teeth. Clearly his body still had strength, but a sense of emptiness filled him. The sounds from all around penetrated his hollow body.

Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain.

Clink.

Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain. Rain.

Clink—

Haruaki raised his head with surprise. Crawling over to the limits of the front edge of the wave breaker, he extended half his torso over the sea. Then he saw a certain object.

"Ha... Haha..."

"Haruaki...?"

His shoulders trembling, Haruaki took out his cellphone and wallet from his pockets, tossing them to Konoha who was puzzled by his actions.

"...I forgot the most important thing. First of all, that girl is heavy. Secondly, she is very stupid, a fool, and very naive. Therefore—she definitely did not give much thought to where she jumped into the sea. Her first choice must be a spot that resembles the sea the most, this place. Yes, definitely. And there's evidence... The people just now said, she was seen roughly ten minutes ago, so this thing couldn't have drifted far."

The corners of his lips rising into a smile, he said lightly:

"I'll be right back."

"Eh? Umm, wait!"

Haruaki jumped into the sea.

The little toy cube struck the wave breaker as it bobbed up and down from the splash.

Was it because he had been splattered by rain all this time? Unbelievably, the seawater felt warm to Haruaki. The saltwater made his emergency bandaged hand hurt, and even though he had prepared himself, it was unexpectedly painful. Within his virtually dark view, he could only dive deeper by using the faint light above to orient himself. As his arm strokes plowed through the water, his fingers suddenly struck sand, surprising him slightly. But now was not the time to be surprised. He proceeded to search his surroundings.

The current situation was, that "thing" should have fallen from the wave breaker like a cannonball, a human-sized cannonball which could neither turn nor swim—surely he could find it. Based on logic, the probability could not be low. Haruaki persuaded himself in this manner. After a while, his fingertips suddenly touched seaweed. Seaweed? —Searching further, at the root of the seaweed was a hard yet soft and round object—hair and a head! Found her!

Next all he needed to do was float back to the surface. Embracing what appeared to be her shoulders, he kicked his legs with all his strength.

(Not good... So heavy!)

Anxiety consumed his oxygen. Was that direction really the surface of the sea? He could not be certain. Perhaps he was advancing towards the seabed. In fact, was he really advancing? Could his legs be kicking empty at the bottom of the sea?

Just as he felt himself in a crisis, an unexpected water current could be sensed all around him. The body he held in his arms felt lighter and his kicking legs seemed to be propelling harder. Several seconds later—

"Puwaaah! Guh, cough... Oooh..."

"Huff... Huff... You... You are way too reckless! Seriously!"

"Sorry... Thanks for saving me."

The one floating beside him was of course Konoha. Haruaki thanked her from the bottom of his heart as he examined the tiny body they embraced between them.

"Our kind shouldn't be able to drown. She should wake up if you leave her for a while."

"Hoo... Honestly, I was really worried. Goodness knows what would happen if this evolved into a drowning incident of another victim! This girl is super heavy, if you hadn't helped it would have been dire."

"Seriously, what if you drowned! If it's heavy then at least come up for air first. This child is not human. Leaving her there a few more minutes would not have mattered."

"Now that you mention it, you're right... I forgot. All I could think of was getting her out from the sea as quickly as possible."

"You forgot? ...Sigh~~"

Konoha sighed in amazement.

"Seriously, if you say it that way, I can't even get angry anymore. Haruaki-kun is really Haruaki-kun... Sigh. Though this does count as one of your good points too..."

As he listened to Konoha's murmurs, Haruaki decided they had to move over to the wave breaker first. However, there did not seem to be any spot to use as a foothold. As he grabbed the Rubik's Cube floating before him, he wondered how to climb back up—Suddenly, someone extended a hand.

"You couldn't have possibly thought... You could get away with things just by offering me an explanation tomorrow, right?"

"Class Rep..."

Extending herself from the wave breaker was Kirika, who looked both angry and relieved. Sweat and rainwater slid down her face—she was holding an umbrella with one hand, and her clothes were not particularly drenched, so it was probably sweat. This meant she must have run all the way here.

"You have to explain properly, Yachi... And Konoha-kun."

"Aww..."

Konoha turned her gaze away, greatly troubled.

"I don't think this is an interesting topic... Could you pretend you didn't see anything?"

"No way. Even though it has only been a day, Fear-kun is already a classmate. I have the right to worry about her, right?"

Troubled—Haruaki shook his head.

He grabbed onto Kirika's outstretched hand.

In any case, they should enter the windbreak plantation for shelter first. Although the trees could not block the rain completely, it was still much better than being fully exposed to the wind and rain out on the wave breaker.

Late night diving was quite exhausting after all. Laying Fear down to let her sleep, Haruaki sat down on the ground.

"Hey, is Fear-kun okay?"

"Yes... Nothing to worry about, I think."

"If you say so, I'll believe it... But you are really useless, you know, look how energetic Konoha-kun is."

"Eh! Uh, I, umm..."

Because I am not human—it was impossible to tell her that directly, hence Konoha tried to dodge the issue ambiguously.

"Achoo! Ah, I feel terrible. Is this my punishment for not exercising regularly enough..."

"You suddenly jumped into the sea, that is too reckless! This is not an issue of regular exercise!"

"...Sorry."

Suddenly hearing the sound of swaying branches, Haruaki frantically turned around—

"Uwah!"

Before his eyes, a figure was suspended upside down from the branches, giving Haruaki quite a shock.

Like some sort of bizarre and strange entrance scene in a horror movie, it turned out to be a bizarre and strange human after all. It was a tiny figure shrouded entirely in black fabric. A rope-like object extended out from the figure's waist. Tied to and suspended from the branches, the sight resembled a bagworm.

"...I am an auxiliary belonging to the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion. Mummy Maker."

"You two, please step back!"

Konoha nimbly stepped forward. However, the bagworm who called herself Mummy Maker slowly shook her head.

"I am an auxiliary, with virtually no combat ability. My purpose here is not for battle."

"...Then why are you here...?"

Haruaki positioned Fear and Kirika behind him and questioned. The girl answered simply:

"A proposal."

"Proposal?"

"The matter of our mission being 'Destroy Fear-in-Cube.' Hence I have a proposal."

A bandaged hand extended out from the mantle and raised a single finger:

"One, you people can destroy Fear-in-Cube yourself. Or two, you can incapacitate her and hand her over to me. Three, you can promise me you will not protect Fear-in-Cube and not hinder us. As long as you agree to one of the three, I will swear that we will not harm any unrelated humans and Wathes in exchange."

"That's completely stupid... If such a proposal was acceptable, I wouldn't have interfered in the first place. Isn't it so obvious you don't even need to ask?"

"Wait a minute, Haruaki-kun... I am very concerned why she still came to ask at this stage."

Konoha glared sharply at Mummy Maker.

"What you mean is—If we were to refuse you, you will target the lives of Haruaki-kun and me? Not simply because our protecting Fear leaves you no choice... But as part of your purpose, even if we do not stand before Fear, you will attack us?"

"...You are free to interpret as you wish."

Seeing Konoha's severe gaze unfazed, Mummy Maker softly supplemented:

"As a further note, this is a friendly offer."

"Friendly? Don't make me laugh... Are these the words of the companion of the lunatic who appeared during the day? Unbelievable. And the proposal itself is so stupid, it is impossible not to be suspicious whether there is a trap."

"I have no conspiracy. This offer comes from me alone. I think it is advantageous to both sides."

In response to Haruaki's voice, her answer sounded slightly guilty. But she immediately went "Sorry I have misspoken" and shook her head.

"I will give you a day's time to consider. Use it to think it through carefully. As for the method of contact..."

Taking out from beneath her mantle something that resembled flashcards, she flipped through it. However—

"...Hmm, method of contact, I seem to have forgotten to prepare..."

Apparently she failed to find what she was looking for. Instead, she searched the inside of her mantle, took out a cellphone, then started operating it with unfamiliarity, producing a noisy series of tones. Then using an adorable voice that did not quite match the scene, she read out the numbers "090..." and copied them on a card.

Having finished her task, she nodded with satisfaction and tossed the card towards Haruaki.

"Telephone number. Please contact this."

"I'm sorry you spent the effort, but like I just said, I won't accept the proposal."

"...Even if your personal safety is at risk?"

"I will permit no one to harm him. Absolutely no one."

Konoha lightly brandished her hand in a karate chop, splitting cleanly in half a leaf that had fallen from a branch.

"Hmm... Well, I am just a nuisance here. It is plain to see, there is a very reliable glasses girl right here. I have no intention of getting taken out right here."

Mummy Maker sighed with disappointment. As if on cue, her body began to rise as well.

"...I have communicated what I intended. I hope you will make a rational decision."

The black-clad figure disappeared amongst the leaves and branches. With a rustle and heavy shaking of a tree trunk—only the sound of rain remained.

"Yachi, just now that was...?"

"Ah— ...Let's leave this for the explanation later as well. I still have many things I haven't figured out yet."

Haruaki casually picked up the card at his feet. It was not something he would ever use. However—

(This is the only method of contacting those unidentified people. Even though simply knowing a telephone number isn't going to be of much use... Throwing it away would be a shame.)

That's right, that was the only reason.

The enemy's proposal was absolutely meaningless. Completely unnecessary.

Abandoning Fear as an unneeded tool, was definitely impossible...

Suddenly, he felt someone's gaze. Konoha was looking at the card. As Haruaki looked up, she laughed as if trying to hide the seriousness in her eyes:

"...So, let's go home?"

"Ah, yes. That's right. I'm going to catch a cold unless I take a warm bath as soon as possible. As for Class Rep—"

"Naturally, I will have to take advantage of your hospitality. The questions keep piling up."

Looks like things were getting more troublesome—Haruaki slumped his shoulders dejectedly and placed the card into his pocket.

Part 7

"How should I put this... She's super heavy. Is it related to the mass of her true form?"

"Well... I guess it can't be unrelated... Let's take turns?"

"I'm still okay. I'll rely on you later."

Haruaki walked as he carried Fear on his back. Although he considered taking a taxi, carrying an unconscious young girl would be far too suspicious. Not long after they started walking, the rain gradually ceased. In the end, they took a shortcut home. Since it was late at night, there were few pedestrians naturally, and there was less worry of being stopped by others.

Still, Haruaki could hear people whispering away about misbehavior. Walking slightly ahead, Kirika turned her head back and asked:

"...True form?"

"Umm, uh... Let's talk about that later as well."

"Oh? Very well—By the way, Konoha-kun, I don't know the way, so walking in front is rather difficult for me, you know?"

"Ah, sorry about that. By the way, since it's so late now, what about your family?"

"I live alone, so there's no problem. So don't even try to drive me away with that reason."

"T-That's not what I meant..."

"Just kidding."

Konoha and Kirika walked side by side as Haruaki followed slowly behind them. Suddenly feeling the sensation of Fear's nose on his neck vanish, he hurriedly tried to shift her back into position. This time, he felt something

smooth and soft. That's her cheek, right? He thought. But just as he intended to start walking again—that skin of hers shuddered.

"You called me heavy... A second time already..."

In that instant, Haruaki deliberated on whether he should turn his head and look back, but decided to keep going like this.

"It is the truth. Seriously, I can't even stand steadily now."

"Towards a lady... How could you speak so rudely! I'm going to get angry, you know? I'll curse you!"

"What a coincidence, I am angry too. I'll curse you!"

"W-What?"

Konoha and Kirika glanced back but did not say a word.

"...Put me down. Also, why... No, I..."

"Let me say this again, I'll curse you! My curse is very powerful, you know, so—please shut up unless you want to be cursed. If you dare ask me to put you down or to leave you alone, you will instantly suffer tragedy."

"...What will happen to me?"

"Your bust won't grow."

"What did you say?!"

Her voice showed some measure of willpower. She looked like she was recovering her usual ways.

"Besides, your curses are useless against me, don't waste your energy."

"..."

"Because they are useless, you cannot threaten me with them and I won't listen to your willfulness. To run away from home, how dare you—do remember that you are the guest my father entrusted me to look after! No matter how many times you run away from home, I will always bring you back, prepare yourself!"

Fear seemed like she had intended to say something, but in the end, her voice was stuck in her throat. From her thighs he was holding under his

arms, Haruaki could feel Fear relaxing all of a sudden. With a trembling voice, she said:

"...How conceited, when clearly you're just a shameless brat."



"Oh my, so I owe you an apology?"

"Don't think you can look down on me just because you can't be cursed. If you don't reconsider that mindset of yours... I will apply a curse on you in a more direct manner, you got that?"

How? —Just as Haruaki wondered, he felt movement from Fear's arms which had been resting on his shoulder. As if crossing her arms, she tightened her hold on Haruaki's neck. Her drenched hair, soft face, flat chest and pale white legs were all tightly pressed against Haruaki.

"...How about that? Feel that cold? You deserve it! Why don't you go and suffer the curse known as the cold..."

"How terrifying, truly, this is a curse that everyone suffers at least once a year!"

Indeed, Fear's body that was embracing him tightly felt rather cold.

But precisely because of that—Haruaki thought.

If he could feel his warmth escaping so quickly, then definitely—

Fear must surely be feeling quite warm now.

Chapter 4 - A Mother and a Body Pillow for the Night / "Voice, a termination, not a termination, her, her"

Part 1

"Uh... Ueno-san, would you like to use the bathroom in my room—"

"No—I wasn't really drenched by the rain. Please lend me a towel, that'll be enough."

Konoha had taken Kirika to her bedroom. Her room had a bathroom attached. Along the way, a scream was heard. Most likely it was due to the sight of the glass window broken by Fear.

Haruaki took Fear to the bathroom in the main building—

"Okay, you go in first, ladies first."

"...I won't catch a cold, but humans will. You first—"

Fear said with her head bowed as she was pushed into the changing area.

"By this point, a few dozen minutes is not going to make a difference, idiot. And who was it that made me jump into the sea in the first place?"

"..."

"A-Anyway, the modern world looks down on male chauvinism. To prevent human rights organizations from busting into our house, you go in first! Or is the short little miss over there trying to tell me she is no lady, hence the modesty?"

"S...Shut up! You go ahead and really catch a cold! Go and die! Be cursed!"

Fear snarled angrily with her face all red. Haruaki took down a towel from a shelf, tossed it to her and left.

Although he said all that, Haruaki did not particularly relish waiting in his wet clothes. Returning to his room to change, he glanced at his bandaged arm. Quite some time had gone by since it was bandaged and there was no new bleeding. As long as he did not move it recklessly, it did not hurt too much. Even though it was a wound from a bladed weapon, thanks mainly to Konoha, critical points were avoided. What truly divine skills.

"Woah, even though I made the offer out of pride, this surely is cold... In these modern times, getting out the heater would be the proper thing to do!"

He returned to the changing area with the wet clothes he had taken off. Listening with one ear from outside, he could hear the splashing sounds of bathing. Looks like she was properly warming herself up.

Quietly, he entered the changing area and threw his wet clothes into the washing machine. At the same time, he took the opportunity to take Fear's clothes in the basket—by the way, which was Konoha's uniform—and threw them in as well. But amongst them were a piece of white fabric that looked like it belonged to Fear. In that instant, Haruaki froze.

"No, wait a minute, I am simply washing clothes. There are no improper thoughts at all. There shouldn't be..."

Nevertheless, he still felt a little guilty. Checking his surroundings meaninglessly, he bent over and slowly reached out towards it. Just as he caught a corner of the wet fabric—a black shadow suddenly appeared beneath his feet.

An ominous black shadow that swiftly crawled out from under the washing machine, indeed it was Strange Creature C. A being that seldom found itself welcome amongst humans. Struck with surprise and terror, Haruaki reflexively cried out.

"Woah!"

"Eeeh...?"

A faint scream was also heard from the bathroom. At the same time, there was the sound of some object like a stool flipping over. Haruaki furiously roared: "Don't scare me!" But there was no answer. Ominously, all he could hear was the sound of the shower persisting.

"Fear... What happened? Fear?"

No response. What happened? Haruaki tapped the frosted glass of the bathroom but nothing could be heard inside.

"Hey—Hey? Answer me! Did you faint? If you don't answer, I'm coming in!"

He hesitated for but an instant. He was now ready for anything. Sliding the glass door open, he walked inside.

Entering into his view were the flipped over stool and wash basin, as well as the shower head sliding along the floor as it spewed hot water, and... Fear, sitting on the bathroom tiles, shrinking into a ball. Teeth chattering, she was trembling all over, her arms around her head covering her ears.

As soon as she discovered Haruaki, she looked up in surprise, displaying her face that was twisted from being on the verge of tears. Then she screamed wildly.

"Yaah!"

"Yaah! My... My bad! I'm glad you're okay! Ugh!"

Suffering a straight right punch to the gut, Haruaki remarked to himself. To think he worried so much about her. Looks like she was more than energetic enough.

In any case, Haruaki crawled out of the bathroom first, reaching out to slide the frosted glass door behind him.

"Don't scare me, you shameless brat! I'll curse you!"

"Sorry, it really was my bad. Why don't you continue your bath, no need to hurry—"

Just as he was turning to leave—

"Ah... Umm, wait... Wait a minute... Since you're here, why don't you listen to something I have to say."

"Can't you tell me after your bath?"

"I want to tell you now. If I don't, my resolve might waver."

The color of her image was visible through the frosted glass. Separated by this sort of halfway distance, her white and silver contours looked rather vague. But in combination with the fresh memories from the sight of her smooth shoulders, waist, and thighs of a girl's, it was too easy to imagine—wait a minute, imagining is not allowed! Haruaki frantically shook his head.

"What?"

"Nothing! It's nothing! Then I will listen..."

Since looking in Fear's direction would lead to strange imaginings, Haruaki sat down and leaned his back against the frosted glass. At this moment, finding his attention caught by the piece of white fabric he had failed to place into the washing machine just now, it was quite a strange feeling.

"What happened just now?"

"Umm... Nothing much. Just a a bug I'm really scared of..."

"A spider?"

"Huh? No, it's that hated thing whose name starts with 'C'... Ugh, simply thinking about it makes my skin crawl. Anyway, it's okay now."

"I see, yes. Simply thinking about it makes my skin crawl. I feel the same way too."

"Were you afraid just now because of that?"

"Id... Idiot! I wasn't afraid! Completely not afraid! Besides—"

Haruaki waited for the conversation to resume. After a few breaths elapsed—

"—No. Even though the reason is different, but make no mistake. I am afraid. As soon as I recall what happened during the day..."

Cutting straight to the point—Haruaki thought to himself. Fear's voice sounded very serious.

"Haruaki... I am afraid of screams. More precisely, the screams of those I feel close to. Which also applies to earlier, as soon as I wonder if I might begin remembering the past, or revealing my past appearance, I feel afraid."

"...If that little scream makes you afraid, it's rather troubling for me too, you know?"

"Just now that was... Because... What happened during the day made me a bit oversensitive. I'm a bit neurotic now... But, perhaps something similar could happen again in the future, so I have to say this first. Scared by a bug aside, but take today for example, if you were hurt by someone, screaming in true pain—perhaps I might really turn back into my old self."

"It's because... Of the screams you used to hear...?"

"Yes. There was once a boy who was responsible for taking care of me while I was still a tool. In the end, that boy's life was sacrificed because of me. Hearing your screams reminded me of that incident. Simply put, I started developing awareness of 'self' back then—though it was an insane self. Haha, I really have no right to mock that insane ape woman."

A laugh of self-mockery came from the other side of the glass.

"But now it's different, right? That's just a type of mental trauma, simply confused memories."

"Even so, I am still me. I have not felt any change in myself. Carrying the same curse, I have come here. Perhaps everything is simply my delusion. Hating the way I was, is my delusion. Perhaps deep down in my heart I might actually desire to murder people as a tool..."

Then silence. After a moment, Haruaki felt the glass behind him shake.

Turning to have a look, he saw a white and silver silhouette behind him. Fear too, was sitting with her back against the bathroom door. Separated by a sheet of frosted glass, they were sitting back to back.

The vague silver silhouette seemed to be directing her gaze upwards, causing the back of her head to strike the glass, making it shake slightly. This vibration must have been felt by Fear and transmitted to Haruaki at the same time. They were connected. Her body, his body, connected by this pane of glass.

The fact that this girl's truly heavy body was mere centimeters behind him—feeling this concretely, Haruaki felt rather uncomfortable. But Fear had yet to notice his feelings.

"...I am really cursed, really a dangerous existence. If you wish to abandon me, you have to do it now."

"Why... Do you have to say that?"

"Because I don't know, whether I have the right to stay here. Whether I have the right to lift the curse and be absolved of sin..."

Haruaki recalled of Konoha's reminder on the rooftop. That's right, whether the curse is lifted or not, had no direct relation with staying in this home.

The only thing related and should be done was—very simple. Because it was too matter-of-fact, hence it was likely that Fear had not realized it, being a non-human. In that case, he had to tell her himself.

"Say... Aren't you always so willful?"

"Wh... What!"

Haruaki sighed with a wry smile.

"Why can't you be willful in this particular matter? I don't remember saying anything about being eligible or not!"

"Eh?"

"It has nothing to do with having rights. If you like it here, then stay! This isn't a confessional where we receive remorse. How should I put it... More like a purification waterfall? Something like that. All monks in training are welcomed, none are refused! So whether you stay or not, depends on 'whether you want to stay or not.' You can make your decision entirely based on that."

Haruaki acknowledged her will and feelings. In the past, she was once a tool. Tools had no will of their own. No feelings. Tools existed because they were needed. In other words, existence in itself was all the acknowledgement they received. This also meant that up to this point, she had never been proactively acknowledged by others.

Fear fell into silence. For quite a while there was no sound or movement. End of conversation? Just as Haruaki was about to get up—his cold body shuddered and he had a great sneeze.

"...Hey. Ummm... You really... Caught a cold...?"

"Hmm? No, simply this place makes me so cold it's unbearable. Old houses tend to have crevices allowing drafts to blow all over the place... I'm not trying to hurry you, okay? But don't bathe for too long, be a bit more efficient and I will thank you. That warm place you're in right now can be considered heaven! To be frank, I'd like to enter the sooner the better."

His nose began to itch again—

"Hoo... Hah... Hah... Hah-choo! ...Ooh~ There we go!"

The instant he finished speaking, the feeling of the glass door against his back suddenly vanished.

"Uwah!" "Hey!"

Dragged into the bathroom, followed by a vigorous yell, Haruaki found his view completely dark. A wet towel was covering his eyes.

"Hey hey hey! What are you doing? Are you trying to kidnap me for a ransom, or are you playing some sort of feudal lord game?"

"Sh... Shut up, stay still!"

"Telling me to stay still... Woah! Why are you unbuttoning my—!"

"Hmph... Hmph! I don't like owing favors! Just now you said that I was the reason you jumped into the sea. Yes, that's right, I am the reason! Any objections? It can't be helped, fine! Since I made trouble for you, let me do a little something to compensate! Aren't you cold! You want to take a bath soon? Very well then, I will help scrub your back right now! It's just an apology, only... An exception only for today! Don't you get the wrong idea!"

"No no no! You don't have to go so far!"

"Shut up and stop struggling! Hmph... Seriously... Clearly you're just a shameless brat...!"

How could he not struggle? This was quite a bad situation. But his shirt was pulled off as he twisted his body, making things worse. Haruaki was just about to stand up as a last ditch measure—

"Didn't I tell you to keep still...! Fine, since things have come to this, I will use brute force to make you submit!"

With great enthusiasm, Fear grabbed him from behind and immobilized him. There was an amazingly soft and supple feeling on his back, but Haruaki forbid himself to think about it! He could also feel a hand reaching for his pants—

"No—!"

Haruaki struggled harder. Somehow, he managed to escape from his restraints. In any case, he first tore off the object covering his eyes in order to find the exit, but his entire view was still obstructed by something white

in color. Unable to see anything, he was confused for an instant, but he still turned around frantically. Just as he stood up—

"You two... What are you doing?"

Konoha was standing in the changing area.

Smiling.

But in a rather terrifying manner.



Haruaki calmly assessed the situation. Behind him, Fear was completely naked. That was only nature, seeing as this was the bathroom. But for some reason, he was present as well. Due to the struggle, he was also panting heavily, with his face most likely all red, his upper torso naked, and his pants halfway—how should one put it, all the elements for a classic misunderstanding were present.

"Hmm~ If you're asking what we were doing—"

Fear's voice came from behind. Because Haruaki dared not look back, he could only try to transmit his thoughts to her: Please, I will rely on you to clear up the situation.

"I guess I could put it this way... For the sake of returning a favor. But all I can give is this body... To be honest, I'm totally embarrassed as well, but I owe him, so there's no other way."

"Hey! Why do you have to pick words that would cause misunderstandings?!"

Konoha's body began to tremble audibly. The intimidating smile remained on her face.

"Hmm? What misunderstanding? Because this is my first time, perhaps I can't do it very well... But I am really offering my body in earnest, trying to make you feel comfortable! A-Actually I'm not completely willing, but for the sake of apologizing it can't be helped—besides, you were the one who started it by what you said!"

"Why is the list of words causing misunderstandings piling up?! What did I say exactly?"

"Something like... 'Unbearable' 'I'd like to enter the sooner the better' 'Your' 'Warm place' 'Huhahaha'... I can't remember all of it, but that's the summary of it. After saying that—you struggled violently, and came in here—then it became like this. No objections, right?"

"Plenty of objections! Your way of summarizing is too outrageous!"

"Ah... Ah..."

Konoha's expression suddenly collapsed and one could almost hear a snap.

"Uwaaaaah! Too... Too indecent—!"

Covering her face with her hands, clearly in great shock, she ran away just like that.

As Haruaki slumped his shoulders in dejection, Fear spoke from behind him in puzzlement:

"Doesn't she understand the meaning of taking a bath? Why would entering the bathroom be indecent?"

Part 2

The smell of curry wafted from the dinner table. However, it came from one of those boil-in-the-bag packaging. Under the assault of sleepiness and hunger, Haruaki was forced to abandon his principle of "Always cook a proper meal regardless of laziness." That said, he still made a salad to make up for it slightly.

"I see... I basically understand now. Konoha-kun and Fear-kun are not human but tools who acquired human characteristics because they were cursed. The person just now was a member of the organization that attacked Fear-kun. Also—"

"Also?"

Kirika narrowed her eyes and said:

"Yachi is the most despicable and worst sort of pervert."

"Can we stop making reference to that...?"

Haruaki tried his best to suppress the impulse to plant his face into his plate of curry. After listening to Konoha's sobbing accusation, Kirika had taken out her cellphone with full seriousness and talked into it: "Hello? I'd like to report a crime, there's a man—" As a result, Haruaki feared that she was not simply teasing but actually angry at him. But then again, he did not enter the bathroom on his own volition—even though he explained, but under those conditions, apparently it was not that easy to convince her.

Expressionlessly moving her spoon, Konoha also seemed equally unconvinced. After listening as Haruaki explained to her and Kirika, she did help out with the salad and recovered a slight sense of trust, nevertheless—she remained silent after that, completely unresponsive to the content of his conversations with Fear.

"So... Class Rep, you don't seem very surprised? I didn't think you'd believe us."

"It's impossible not to believe, right? The Rubik's Cube transformed right before my eyes and just now, Konoha-kun demonstrated by chopping up an empty box with just a finger. Based on common sense, these are all impossible phenomena, but the truth is they did happen. In other words, something beyond common sense has happened. Whether super powers, alien technology or cursed tools, I have no choice but to believe. By this point, I don't think you would still lie."

Eating curry by the mouthful, Kirika displayed a calm expression. Still, she should be confused to some extent—

"Besides, our common sense is very narrow. So-called common sense consists of known information that is shared amongst the people, hence everything unknown falls outside the realm of common sense. Starting from a long time ago, I had been thinking there must be reasons for frequent sightings of ghosts, UFOs, unidentified mysterious animals (UMAs), etc. There is no reason to dismiss them all as delusions or mistaken observations. They lack explanation only because our current knowledge is insufficient to explain them. Isn't it more natural to think that way? And currently, I have simply been exposed to the knowledge of cursed tools by coincidence. It would be equally surprising for me as the discovery of the coelacanth, but if I were to disbelieve it, that would be absolutely ridiculous. There are also numerous legends of cursed tools so there is nothing unbelievable there. That's right, nothing unbelievable. Examples include the likes of Marie Antoinette's blue diamond, the Pharaoh's mask, etc. I see now, I see that it's true after all... I have no choice but to believe..."

"...Kirika."

The one who interrupted her unending murmurs was not Haruaki but Fear. Using her spoon to mix up her plate meaninglessly, the curry was quickly turning into dry curry. ^[2]

"So, what you mentioned just now... Was the time when you ran into me on the streets—"

Hesitating, she paused for quite a while before continuing—

"I... am very sorry. Letting you see me in an unusual state. Making you afraid. I'd like to apologize for that. Ah, seriously—I am the one who is the most scared of myself, surely there's something wrong."

"And?"

"And what? ...You're not afraid of me? I am... That kind of—"

"Is the current you the same one in that 'unusual state'? Or are you saying you'll suddenly turn into your 'unusual state'?"

Fear held her breath and immediately shook her head in denial:

"No! I don't want that! I don't want to ever again... That happened because of all sorts of things—"

"Then it's okay, right? Besides, even though I was surprised back then, I wasn't scared very much. How should I put it... You saved me when those strange guys were hassling us."

Saying that, Kirika smiled lightly:

"So basically, I should be thanking you! Thank you for saving me."

Shocked for an instant, Fear lowered her gaze as if feeling shy, and finished her curry in one breath:

"N-No need to thank me. Haruaki, another please! This thing called curry is pretty tasty! Next time, put some rice crackers in it!"

"Don't be silly... But I seem to remember there should be one more pack of curry remaining. Fine, I'll warm it up. Please wait here."

Haruaki got up and quietly whispered "Thank you" in Kirika's ear. Kirika winked in response.

Silently, Konoha continued to eat her curry.

"It's this late already. I've already listened to all the details, so I should be getting home now... However, let me ask about one more matter. Isn't Fear-kun being targeted by the enemy now? What are you all going to do from here on?"

This question instantly caused a change in mood. Naturally, Haruaki instantly recalled Mummy Maker's ridiculous proposal.

However, Fear continued to enjoy her second helping of curry as she answered leisurely:

"Hmm. From here on... That strange woman already lost an arm. I can't really imagine her fighting properly anymore, so she won't be back? Besides, even if she came again, we'll easily drive her away again—Right? What's up, did I say something wrong?"

"No, hmm... Nothing wrong."

Haruaki agreed vaguely. She was not aware. The fact that Peavey's comrade had visited them, the fact that they had not given up on destroying Fear, and the fact that they plan on eliminating those apart from Fear—

But even if she knew, the conclusion would be pretty much what Fear had proposed. Hence Haruaki agreed with her.

"No matter what, we don't know where they're staying, so we can't really take the initiative."

"Yachi, I'd like to have your opinion simply as a reference. If you did know their location, what would you do?"

"That's also a problem. Even if we went to persuade them not to come back, they don't really seem like they would listen. In that case, we may have to resort to force—"

"...If you're planning to seriously break the law, I'm going to stop you."

"Of course. Basically we'll see if we can teach them a lesson to scare them from coming back, or maybe destroy or rob them of their equipment so they have nothing to use... Something like that. I have no wish to do anything more drastic, nor would I let you two to do so."

Throwing Fear and Konoha a glance, he continued:

"Basically, because we don't know where they are, we couldn't take such dangerous actions even if we wanted to. So anyway, let's just hope they don't return, and if they do, then just like we mentioned, we'll drive them off—That is where I stand for now. That said, we should continue to look for a better solution..."

"I see... Anyway, since I've heard about the matter, I can no longer pretend to be ignorant. All's well if nothing happens, but in case something does, come find me to discuss it! So—"

Getting up, Kirika hesitated for a moment and—

"That's right, I am the class rep. Yes, so I am bound by duty to help my classmates."

"...Thanks."

Haruaki smiled at Kirika. He had no intention of embroiling her into trouble, but he still felt quite happy for her kind offer.

"By the way, isn't it dangerous for a female high school student to be walking home alone at this time, how about I walk you home?"

"No, it's fine. I will take a taxi."

"Oh, a member of the bourgeois class... Then I'll send you to the door."

As he stepped out of the living room, Haruaki glanced back to find Fear engrossed in her plate of curry, nodding absentmindedly to express farewell. On the other hand, Konoha was simply staring at her tea cup blankly.

At the entryway, Kirika put on her school shoes as she asked in a whisper:

"It's not really my business to say this, but regarding that person's 'proposal,' are you really—"

"Absolutely rejected."

Kirika smiled mysteriously as if finding him hopeless, but at the same time, she seemed to be saying: Now that's the Haruaki I know.

"Since you have decided, then I won't say anymore. I was only concerned because you picked up the card."

"I was only wondering if it might come in handy in some way."

"Very well. Ah, by the way, also..."

"...Eh? Where's the card?"

Reaching into his pocket, Haruaki was met with surprise, but immediately he remembered he had changed his clothes.

"Right, it's in my pants in the washing machine. Sorry, I'll get it right now so that I don't forget and wash it with the clothes. Wait for me here and we'll continue the conversation!"

"Ah, no, there's nothing important left to say..."

Haruaki listened to the voice behind him as he rushed into the changing area and began searching the pockets in his pants. He was greatly surprised to find it missing. No matter how hard he searched it could not be found. Running over to his room where he had changed, it was not there either. He ran back to the entryway.

"...How is it?"

"Terrible, I lost it. I might have dropped it somewhere."

"How could you lose something so important?!"

Kirika frowned and helped him search the entryway. Naturally, it was not found here either.

"After changing in my room... I only went to the changing area next to the bathroom? Then I lost it on the way home? Damn it, what should we do?"

"You're kind of clueless in strange areas like this one."

Kirika sighed as if exasperated and reached out for the notepad by the telephone. Picking up a pen on the side, she wrote as she spoke:

"...Basically this, right? Because she read it out as she wrote."

"Class Rep, you remembered it?"

"I have a habit of remembering everything if it's important. This is far simpler to remember than timelines in history."

"Man, you're too amazing... You really helped me a lot! I'm saved! I love you!"

"D-Don't talk nonsense! Hmph!"

Kirika blushed and shoved the notepaper into Haruaki's hand.

"Thanks, I'll be careful not to lose it. What was it you wanted to say just now?"

"Nothing important really—Forget it. I just wanted to tell you, Konoha was acting quite strange during the meal."

"Yes, that's right... What could be the reason..."

As soon as he mused casually, Kirika glared at him sharply.

"Let me guess, she must have been greatly shocked by your pervert antics."

"Ugh. She's still upset about that...? I'll try to explain to her again later."

"So be it, but I can't guarantee she will forgive you."

Timidly, Haruaki tried asking Kirika:

"...What about you, Class Rep?"

Smiling in response, she then made a beheading gesture with her hand while maintaining the same expression.

"If you don't want everyone to know about this incident, help me out with this!—Who knows how many times I will get to use this statement in the future? Looks like I'll be able to lighten my load for the sports festival and the cultural festival, what a relief... Well then, goodnight."

Several minutes later, the scene was still at the entryway. Konoha was blanky putting on her shoes. In the end, she only spoke thrice at the dinner table: "...Thanks for the meal." "...I'm full now." "...Well then, time for me to head back."

"Konoha. Listen to me, Konoha!"

"...Ah, sorry. Yes, yes... What is it?"

"Say, are you still angry about that? Like I said, it was Fear who dragged me into the bathroom. It only turned out like that as a result of the unusual circumstances. I didn't do anything suspicious—"

"Eh? Oh that—what happened just now, I'm no longer angry."

She responded with a smile. Although her expression was darker than usual, the sense of anger at the bathroom was gone. Haruaki silently breathed a sigh a relief.

"That's good... Because you were acting a bit strange. If there's anything you feel concerned about, let's talk over it."

"Nothing. Hmm... There is something concerning, so I was lost in thought, no doubt about it... But it has nothing to do with you, Haruaki-kun, so please don't worry about it."

"Really?"

Really—Konoha nodded with a smile.

"Sorry you were worried. So... What about tomorrow?"

Haruaki glanced at the little clock on top of the shoe cabinet. The clock which usually warned him when he was at risk of being late, was in a certain sense, currently predicting a great chance of being late the next day.

"Absolutely nothing we can do about it. Tomorrow is Saturday, right? We'll just miss half a day of class, think of it as our good fortune. I'm going to sleep in until noon. At least for tomorrow and the day after that, I plan on observing the situation at home... What about you?"

"I'll also... Slack off and take a break too."

"That's right~~ Three cheers to sleep!"

"Ah, I guess if I push myself, I could still go to school... But then again... Tomorrow... There's something I wish to do, so..."

"Something you wish to do?"

"This also has nothing to do with you, Haruaki-kun."

Though her tone of voice sounded gentle, somehow there was a sense of refusal that prevented him from probing further.

"So... Our strategy will be as Ueno-san described, passively wait for the enemy's next move?"

"I guess so, there's not much we could do with just a phone number. That strange proposal could be just a bluff. Perhaps they might be turning tail and fleeing for their lives."

"...That's true too. But there are many possibilities. They might return, they might not, they might be planning something—perhaps Haruaki-kun or I

will be attacked. Even if it might be a bluff, it does raise the likelihood of an ambush."

As if ruminating over something, she paused for a moment then spoke:

"It would be better to stay alert for now. Please be careful."

"Yeah—yes."

"However, Haruaki-kun, you only need act as usual. Don't think too much or too deeply, just live normally and it'll be fine."

"Which is it? Don't think too much, or live normally?"

"Both."

Saying that, for some reason, she smiled slightly apologetically.

Part 3

Just before noon the following day, Haruaki was preparing brunch, clearly indulging in laziness.

His mind was not occupied with cooking but the dialogue with Konoha the previous night.

What should he do henceforth? Even if he did not want to think about this issue, the thoughts flowed into his mind on their own. Even though he had long accustomed himself to cursed tools, Haruaki was still a powerless ordinary human, and like most people, he would still worry.

—I will give you a day's time to consider.

If he believed in that Mummy Maker, perhaps nothing might happen today. But what of tomorrow? The day after that? Who knew—perhaps he himself would be attacked. Konoha was correct, the likelihood had increased. Correct, so long as they did not accept the proposal, so long as they did not give up on Fear, then—

Haruaki clicked his tongue.

(How stupid. I must have slept myself into a daze. What is wrong with me...)

Before the time limit was up for pondering, he should do something but definitely the proposal was unacceptable. Anyway, rather than pondering

these things, he should figure out what ingredients to add to the miso soup instead.

At this time, a patter of footsteps entered the kitchen.

"Haruaki."

"Huh? The meal isn't ready yet, go watch some television."

"The television is exactly what I came to ask about. That black device underneath, what is it? I'm very curious, tell me!"

"That's called a videocassette recorder. It's used to record television programmes."

"What! You can even record the things recorded on television... Then that means you can preserve them for eternity, and watch them again and again forever!"

"That's really exaggerated of you. Anyway, VCRs are kind of outdated nowadays."

"What? That kind of invention already outdated... D-Damn humans, what a dangerous game you play!"

Seeing her in serious amazement, Haruaki could not help but smile wryly. Somehow, it made him feel a little better.

He still felt a vague sense of uneasiness—but there was no fear. Why was that? He tried to self-analyze—

(Forget it, I believe in my ability to judge people.)

He believed—Perhaps such an explanation was rather cliched, but that was basically the result.

He believed in the Japanese sword that was both a bespectacled girl and very domestically inclined. Furthermore, for the sake of compensating for her crimes, the strange cube girl who was desperately learning to adapt to the world—

"Teach me how to use it! Damn it, if I'd known earlier, I could have recorded that 'Meow Meow Paradise Hell' programme permanently...! Those fuzzy little fellows and their cute voices, makes me so want to hug them tight and scream!"

"So is it really heaven or hell? What an incomprehensible programme..."

"Okay, hurry and teach me! Actually there's so much I want to know! How to wash clothes properly, how to use the air conditioning and the phone... Yes, also, I want to unravel the mystery of the noise I hear from your room every morning—"

"Yeah yeah I got it. Let's save that for after the meal."

In the end, Haruaki's mood simply concluded "Though what tomorrow brings may be worrying, bring it on!" Though it could not be described as completely bright and cheerful, it was not gloomy at all. His body felt completely relaxed, but his mind had not rest at all. It was a day full of contradictions.

(Somehow I keep feeling like this is the kind of strange holiday where stress is built up... Fine, for a time like this, let's add some vigor to my latest cooking creation! I'm just copying what I've seen before, but I'll manage somehow!)

Hence, the ingredient for the miso soup was decided.

"By the way... Did you know? There exists something called rice cracker miso soup."

"Wh...What? How intriguing..."

"I am making it for the first time too. This is a recent fad."

"Wait a minute, I'm getting worried if you put it that way. I can't tolerate the waste of rice crackers, I must supervise you now..."

"...If you stare like that, you'll only distract me and cause me to fail. Would you like to help with some simple tasks?"

As soon as he spoke, Fear was all smiles:

"Can I? Yes yes, I want to help! What should I do first?"

"Well... Why don't you start by watching this pot for me, don't let the water overflow when it boils."

"Yes, leave it to me!"

Fear approached the gas stove and knelt down halfway, bringing her serious face near the pot. The sight of Fear bending over to monitor the pot was enough to bring a smile to anyone's face.

(Whatever, enthusiasm is all she needs currently.)

Then Haruaki continued with his other tasks. Suddenly—

"...By the way, can I ask a question?"

"Hmm? What ?"

"The water overflowing when it boils,' what does that mean?"

"What? Ah, that's this! What you're looking at right now!"

Haruaki frantically shut off the gas.

"Oh... So when it's hissing and bubbling like this? Now I know."

"...That's really great."

Seeing Fear nodding away profoundly, Haruaki groaned with his eyes half closed. He amended the thought he just had—more accurately, enthusiasm was all she had at this point.

No need to be impatient. At this point all she needed was enthusiasm. First she had to develop self esteem, that was the most important... Based on this line of thinking, he then asked Fear to do some simple chores. Carrying the dishes, turning the switch on the gas stove, etc. Simply stated, tasks that were noncritical.

The cooking continued in this manner. Just as Haruaki reached out to the cabinet located high in the kitchen—

"Hmm..."

"Wh... What's wrong? Is your arm hurting where that woman wounded you?"

"No... It's nothing serious... But certain unusual motions still cause a bit of pain."

"Don't force yourself, leave it to me."

Just as he was about to point out what could Fear do when she was shorter than him, Haruaki found his answer seconds later.

"Hey hey, isn't this backwards? For a man to be carried on a girl's back, that's quite an innovative form of shameful posture!"

"Stop complaining, grab what you need quickly!"

There was no other option at this point so Haruaki swiftly found what he was looking for and got off from Fear.

"It can't be... Are you still miffed about my comments about your weight?"

"I-Idiot! Of course not, completely not, how rude! I'll curse you! You're really the worst kind, completely insensitive to the delicate hearts of others, a shameless brat!"

Clearly he was right on target. Fear pointed at Haruaki as she changed the subject:

"A-Anyway, what is that?! A club!?"

"Why would a kitchen have that kind of weapon? This is a stick of bonito flakes. Compared to the bagged version, this type is tastier. The flakes have to be shaved off using this—like that, pretty much. Do you want to try?"

Of course! Fear nodded and displayed a tense expression as she slid the bonito rod against the grate. Though her movements were rather unfamiliar, she did manage to shave flakes off so there should not be any problem.

"...So troublesome."

"That's the way it is. You can say that for all cooking too."

"If only there was a tool for shaving a large amount of all at once—Right!"

As if she suddenly thought of something, Fear looked up.

"Using my drill, perhaps it could be shaved off easily. Worth a try!!"

"...Please stop."

"Of course I'm just joking."

Saying that, Fear laughed lightly with great delight.

As the cooking finished with nothing left for her to do, Fear began to protest unhappily. Haruaki had no other choice but to issue her the final command.

"Cough... The silver little miss over there, I will now entrust you with the most important mission in this enterprise."

"Oh? What is it?"

"While I'm mixing this, you have to help by praying that the flavor will be distributed evenly. This is very important! Put your hands like that! You have to keep saying: 'Become tasty~~!'"

"Be... Become tasty!"

That's right, at this point, having enthusiasm was enough. There was no point in being impatient, so long as she improved gradually—No need to think too deeply, just do things casually. And his mission was to assist her.

As he thought to himself, Haruaki desperately suppressed his laughter as he watched Fear, her hands extended, a serious expression on her face as she delivered her mental waves to the bowl.

Part 4

From the window of her room in the detached accessory dwelling, Konoha watched the commotion in the main residence. Though she could not see everything going on inside the home, glancing at the porch from afar was enough to catch a sense of the bustling within.

A patter of busy footsteps. Did something go wrong? Haruaki's anxious voice was heard. Holding a cloth, the girl started scrubbing the floorboards of the porch. Halfway through, she got tired of scrubbing and took a nap. When Haruaki discovered, he gently picked her up in his arms—and tossed her into the garden. The girl complained acutely and noisily, but no sooner had Haruaki taken out a bag of rice crackers, she began to moan and reach out with her hands. But she could not reach the bag. As Haruaki moved the bag left and right, Fear's upper torso with both arms raised also swayed from side to side. The sight truly resembled the teasing of a cat.

Watching this scene that would make anyone smile, Konoha's cheeks relaxed, but only for an instant. Immediately, she returned to her task.

—Monitoring the dangerous girl before her eyes.

Konoha recalled the scene at the roof. The girl's pressure, the force of that inquisitional wheel, as well as the unbearable fear she felt when that thing crashed towards Haruaki—

That sort of event could not be allowed to happen again. Hence, Konoha had no choice but to regard that girl as dangerous.

Even though there was no problem currently, she could not be careless. As she thought, further confirmation was necessary...

"Though it's this sort of... Hated role..."

She murmured to herself. Yet she did not give up. For the sake of protecting him.

No mistake, everything was for that purpose. Hence, there was something else she had to carry out while monitoring the girl.

Her finger caressed the rim of her glasses. Her eyes showed such intensity that there was an illusion of a creaking sound as she maintained alert awareness of the surroundings. Were they really given a simple period of consideration? Currently, there were no strange presences in the surroundings of the house. Nevertheless, she could not be careless when the enemy could show up at any time—

"....."

Konoha searched for presences in the surroundings as she watched the silver figure below.

With great concentration, she continued with these two tasks of hers.

Part 5

"...Mummy Maker, could you get me some water?"

Waking up from thirst, she spoke but there was no answer. Peavey had no choice but to get up from bed. The sight of that hated bandage, which acted as some sort of wake up greeting, caused her to click her tongue disapprovingly.

Though the shoulder wound brought convulsive pain on occasion, Peavey no longer minded. Stepping on the carpet, she could feel strength in her legs. Even though this could not compare to her condition in full health, based on the current progress, she should be able to move about starting tomorrow. A full day of rest was needed—listening to the girl's advice turned out to be rather worth it.

Peavey had already decided on the next day's operation. This was the conclusion brought about by her sense of mission and revenge that finally overcame her pride. For this purpose, she pondered the preparations she must make as she stepped out of the bedroom.

The sky outside the window was just a swathe of darkness. There was truly no sign of Mummy Maker in the room. She probably went to scout again? —Thought Peavey to herself. The girl had guaranteed that those people would not flee, nor would she let them flee. Only because of that, Peavey agreed to spend a day's worth of time in this manner. How commendable, that girl's diligence in her work—let me caress her head when she gets back.

As Peavey walked towards the washroom to get water, she suddenly found something had fallen on the floor near the door. It was one of those cards that Mummy Maker often flipped through. Did she drop this when she went out?

Picking up the card, Peavey casually glanced at the words written on it.

"This is..."

Her surprise only lasted for an instant. Immediately, she began to laugh.

Giggling like a young girl.

Laughing like a maniac,

hahahahahaha

Part 6

Just as predicted, the day ended peacefully. Haruaki thought to himself as he dove into bed under the covers.

The problem was tomorrow. After the allotted day of consideration, what would happen next? What action would the other party take?

Furthermore—the next day was Sunday, which was fine—but what about Monday when they had to go to school? What should Fear do then? Or what about when he went to school, would some sort of danger befall him... There was plenty to contemplate, but the comfort of the bed gradually absorbed those thoughts.

(What happens tomorrow, will be considered... Tomorrow...)

Then Haruaki entered the land of dreams.

Subconsciously—He decided that "tomorrow" would begin from the morning.

But that was not what the enemy thought.

When he suddenly woke to a noise, he found a figure standing in the room.

"...? Who... Who is it?"

The only source of lighting was the moonlight streaming in from the window. Only the vague outline of the intruder could be seen floating in the darkness. Shrouded by a large piece of cloth, the figure's head and entire body was completely covered.

(...Mummy Maker!)

Haruaki jumped in fright. The figure remained silent in the darkness, only swaying her body. From a gap in her mantle, a long and slender object could be seen dangling, waving ominously.

Haruaki recalled the scene when Peavey was swept away by the bandage. Mummy Maker had claimed to have no combat ability but at least she had that sort of power. On the other hand, he was just an ordinary human. What should he do? Escape? Or take a gamble and charge forward—

"Haruaki-kun!"

Perhaps hearing the noise just now, Konoha pulled the room's slide door open. Standing in her pajamas, she narrowed her eyes sharply as she glared at the figure in the room.

The figure emitted a rustling noise from her hand—probably the sound of a bandage or something extending—then it stopped at the same time. The figure turned her hooded head to face Konoha.

There was an instant of delay.

The next action came from—Fear! Squirming her way between Konoha's legs at the doorway to enter the room—

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi», Curse Calling!"

The Rubik's Cube transformed itself into a long and broad axe to attack the dark shadow.

No mercy at all, no hesitation at all, no confusion at all.

"...!"

As the figure turned around, her left arm was sent flying with a spatter of blood.

"Haha... How dare you make a surprise attack while we were sleeping!"

Without any hesitation, the figure wrapped the cursed tool around the severed arm and turned around. Without giving Fear and Konoha a second glance, she jumped out the window. Decisively, she chose a complete retreat.

After enduring several seconds of silence, Haruaki slumped his shoulders.

"Eh eh... What should I say, thanks for the help. I never expected her to come as soon as the twenty-four hours were over."

"Sorry, even though I've been on alert all along, because there was no murderous intent, I discovered too late..."

"Were they planning on capturing me as a hostage?"

"Maybe... Anyway, there are no other presences now... I will stay on higher alert from now on."

"Then I'm really grateful... Will she return? She said she had no combat ability but then she ran here on purpose. Maybe it's because the other woman with the muscular arm retired from injury. And if that person just now retires from injury as well... Assuming they are a two-person team, they should be giving up, right?"

"That would be best. I don't know. We can't be off our guard yet."

Haruaki switched on the light, only to find Konoha watching Fear's silent profile instead of looking at him.

"...Fear?"

"Umm... Wh-What?"

"Were you planning to kill her?"

A simple question. Hearing that, Fear suddenly looked up in surprise. Frantically, she shook her head:

"N-No, nothing like that! I heard a noise, and found... Haruaki being attacked, so I got all angry instantly, then... Then I was thinking, I've got to save him... I did—Yes, I did hold back! I only sliced off her arm by chance! Only by chance..."

"By chance... Is that right? Very well."

Fear stared for a few seconds at the Rubik's Cube that had returned to its toy form. "—I'm going back to sleep." Then she turned and left.

Konoha sharply glared at Fear's back as she slumped her shoulders and walked dejectedly. After a long while—

"Well then, I'm returning to my room too. I will take care not to let stray cats into the house. Please rest assured. As for the future, let's talk about it tomorrow!"

"Okay... Yeah."

Left alone once again, Haruaki sensed a strange atmosphere as he scratched his head in puzzlement.

Then it suddenly occurred to him—shouldn't the room be spattered with blood? But turning his head to survey the room—

"...Eh?"

Logic would dictate a blood-stained floor but he could not find a single drop of blood. All he could see was his ruffled futon and a little dirt from the intruder's shoes—Only that. Although it was unbelievable, seeing as cursed tools were involved, anything could have happened without being surprising. In any case, he decided to give up pondering how it happened.

"...Whatever, I'll just be thankful that it saved me the clean up effort. Scrubbing blood stains late at night would be quite a horrifying scene."

Part 7

A few hours after the intruder had appeared, Fear was still staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep. She noticed the sliding door to the room being shaken.

"I have something to talk to you about."

The voice stopped. Even though it sounded calm, there was something about the tone which made it impossible to disobey. Fear got up and slid open the door to find Konoha standing on the porch, her back facing the moonlight. She was expressionless.

"What? At a time like this... Let's talk tomorrow."

"It has to be said now. I don't want the noise to wake Haruaki-kun. Let's take a walk as we chat? I'll wait for you outside."

Deciding matters on her own, she walked over to the corridor in a manner like an intangible mirage.

"Even though taking a walk with you isn't really my cup of tea..."

Fear grumbled but Konoha did not stop. Fear sighed and changed out of her pajamas into casual wear. Putting on sandals as she exited the front door at the entryway, she found Konoha turning around after a glance at her.

"Where are we going?"

"There's a forest behind the house. It's close enough that I can sense if anyone comes to this house. Follow me."

Just as she described, making their way around the walls encircling the home, they reached a lonely forest behind the house. The only source of light was the bright moon above, but to non-humans like Fear and Konoha, this proved to be no particular challenge.

"So, what do you have to say? You can't be inviting me for a walk just to entertain me, right?"

"—That's right."

Konoha halted her steps, but she did not turn around, standing there motionless.

"There are certain things I wanted to know, so I've been watching you today. But I am still uncertain, so I had no choice but to do this."

"Huh?"

Unable to comprehend her words, Fear questioned but Konoha ignored her and continued on seriously:

"I hope you can do something. No need to think too deeply, for it is a very simple task."

"Could you be more clear... What task is very simple?"

"Just a request. That's right, it's really simple, and this request only takes an instant to complete—"

"—Could you please go and die."

With a wave of her hand held like a karate chop, she stabbed right into Fear's soft chest.

Part 8

Once again, she heard words that had never been spoken to her before.

"Welcome back. Did anything happen?"

"...Maybe, maybe not. Over at their place—"

"How devoted to your work as an auxiliary, I really must reward you."

Her head was being caressed. Stopping her report, she focused her attention to the sense of touch.

As per their agreement, she took off Chupacabra Bandage as soon as she returned to the hotel. With only a mantle covering her bare skin, it was a little chilly, but simply having her head caressed brought a sense of warmth from within. How incredible.

After a moment, the hand left her head. To be honest, she felt rather reluctant for the feeling to stop, but she could not make willful demands.

Peavey opened a suitcase in the corner of the room and began to search for something.

"...Hmm, I've thought of something. The report just now..."

"It doesn't matter anymore. I too, have thought of something. Can I ask you a question?"

"...Please go ahead."

"Can I ask again, what is your name? Not a boring nickname like Mummy Maker but your real name."

Peavey spoke without looking back.

To be frank, Mummy Maker hated her own name. This was the name given by her most hated parents. The name given by the man and woman who had tried to burn her to death. The name that had been destroyed in the fire, abandoned when she was bandaged like a mummy in the hospital. After that, her mother at the hospital bedside had strangled her neck, saying: "Why didn't you die?! Then we can't claim the insurance money!" Back then, she had cursed her own name.

But given this person here, being called that name was fine—that was what she thought. So long as it was this person who caressed her gently.

Deliberating a little longer, Mummy Maker finally spoke her name. The feeling of speaking that name felt too nostalgic, bringing an incredible sense of embarrassment.

"...Amanda. Amanda Carlot."

"Really, that's a good name."

Peavey smiled as she turned around.

"Well then, goodbye."

The massive axe swung down at Amanda's abdomen.

"...Eh... Ah...?"

Blood shot out from the depths of her throat like a fire. She could not understand what was happening to her. Why would her abdomen feel so scorching hot? Why could she feel wind flowing inside at the same time?

What was this she was vomiting? Dirtying this expensive looking carpet, will she be scolded?

"I don't know if you know this, but this is «Dance Time» which belonged to the knight Rielrink who died last month. This was what I was talking about in our first telephone conversation. The higher ups must have decided on their own to mix this into my luggage, trying to avoid having a Wathe idle meaninglessly without a master. Seriously, I can only call them meddlesome... But now that things have come to this, it is the only recourse left."

Incomprehensible. What was she talking about? Why? This? Where was the warmth from that hand just now?

"Oh my, your eyes seem to be asking 'Why did you do this?' I think you understand of course, but let me tell you one of the reasons."

Through her unsteady gaze, the girl watched as the woman in a dress held a card between her fingers. That... That was?

Peavey waved her arm and said teasingly:

"Something that you dropped. So, what's written on it, eh... Oh my? These digits are your telephone number right? Are you trying to imitate a callgirl? So I looked on the back side. Ah~~ I see, you even recorded in detail your 'To-do List.' Proposing to let that sword and the boy called Yachi off if they give up Fear-in-Cube. Also, asking for reinforcements from the Dominion and to return the wounded—Having lost this note, have you remembered to finish all of these tasks? Hoho."

As if it were extremely filthy, Peavey threw the card away. Her body convulsing as she collapsed to the floor, the girl looked at the card straight before her. The row of numbers were indeed her own handwriting. Why was it here? Furthermore—

(...Did I write down all that...?)

She could taste iron with her tongue. She was reminded of fire but she was not in a fire right now. Contradiction. Contradiction. The phone number had been written down that time to give to those people, it could not possibly be here; there was nothing written on the back. Most importantly, she knew that calling for reinforcements would anger Peavey, which was why she considered it but chose not to after all. In other words, the card did not

record what she was supposed to do, did she really give this card out—it was given out—it was given out... Should have—dunno—

"This is truly betrayal. My wish is to personally destroy that stinking bitch of a box, the boy and the Japanese sword. Proposal? Reinforcements? Return? Who needs such hindrances?! That fact that you have been doing this secretly behind my back indicates you must have progressed to a certain extent, and have no intention of changing your mind, right? Then a person like that is of no use to me and only a hindrance, even an affront to my eyes—which is why I have decided to part way with you."

Hindrance. An affront to the eyes.

That's not right. I... It was for you... That was why I did it! Because I didn't want you to die... That was why I did it!

Unable to speak. Seeing her hand twitching and trembling, like a frog, how disgusting. She was being hated, how troubling.

Peavey picked up the axe by her feet and stepped forward.

"As for the second reason... A matter of coincidence. This disgusting axe requires the blood of a live sacrifice in order to activate its taboo power. Even though I could have managed along the way, this is rather convenient—Ah, by the way, it is still very disgusting. Though it can't be helped, being forced to touch a Wathe is really... As soon as the job is done, I might as well replace this remaining arm with a prosthetic as well?"

Speaking leisurely, she swung the axe in her hand.

A grin on her face.

"...Cough... Wheeze..."

"Hmm? You want to say something?"

That's right, I want to tell her. There's something I need to tell her.

"The report you were about to make? I'll listen to you. Hoho, if you're not deceiving me."

No. By this point, that kind of report did not matter. What happened at that home, in any case—

She simply wanted to turn her inner thoughts into words. But she could not make a sound. A warm substance filled her throat. Instead, she wanted to

show using facial expression, but her face could not move either. She could feel liquids at the corners of her eyes and mouth.

Ah... Really want to tell her... So want to tell her... Clearly want to tell her.

I've always wanted someone to caress my head, and she did it for me.

Even if it was a ruse, deception, just killing time, a mistaken impression on my part, she did caress my head gently.

Having only experienced wrongs, I was struck with this revelation for the first time—feeling this must be correct. She had given me this.

That's right, hence—

"Oh my, it's hopeless for you now. Well then, it's about time—"

Thank you, for teaching me what a mother is like—She wanted to tell Peavey that.

"Goodnight, Amanda."

The axe-wielding maniac called out her name with more loving gentleness than the girl's parents, more than anyone.

Such a happy experience had never been recorded in this girl's life.

Part 9

"You... Suddenly... What are you doing...?"

At the very last moment, Fear grabbed Konoha's hand and pushed back with all her might. The fingertips which had stabbed millimeters into her finally left her body.

"Didn't you hear me? I said, please go and die."

The eyes beneath the glasses flashed mercilessly with sharp metallic luster.

Seeing her left hand moving, Fear leaped to Konoha's side and kicked at her. Konoha reflexively jumped backwards, her merciless left hand giving off the sound of slicing wind. This was no joking matter.

"...Tell me the reason!"

"Reason? Reason eh... Hohoho, then I will not hold back my inner thoughts!"

Only at this time did Konoha's lips smile faintly for the first time. A twisted smile of mockery. As Konoha pushed up her glasses with one hand, Fear felt a chill down her spine and goosebumps all over. Next to Konoha's fingertips, the glasses flashed. Beneath those lenses, her eyes were so intense that they seemed to be creaking as they distorted from the pressure—Like cat's eyes giving off eerie light—

"For me to destroy a rotten old box of mechanisms... What further reason would I need other than the fact that the sight offends my eyes?"

"...! You—"

Fear moaned in terror. Then slowly Konoha's demonic aura—changed back to normal killing intent.

"Hmm, yes... Basically that."

"You wolf in sheep's skin!"

"Don't use such an unpleasant description. It's simply the fact that past selves do not disappear. Very well, are you done with talking? After all, you're going to die here."

"I don't really get what's going on... Huh, but in the end, you still turn out to be my enemy."

"You can decide that for yourself."

"Hoho... Hohoho. I never liked you from the second I laid eyes on you. Are you an enemy? An enemy, right? You are an enemy!"

"... Have you made your decision? Then what are you going to do next?"

Asking me what I'm going to do next? Isn't it obvious? Enemies must be defeated. Fear took out the Rubik's Cube.

A sense of liberation. From the depths of her mind, she felt a refreshing sense of liberation. Given an "enemy," she must fight "in self-defense" and she had to attack "with initiative." By doing that, surely she would get to hear wonderful "screams," hence "kill" "kill" "kill" "scream" "kill" "kill" "scream" "kill" "scream" "kill."

"Emulation start."

Since there was no choice, then let's do it! This was fine, right? Her heart felt pain as if a sharp wedge had been driven in there, what was that? Ahhh... No good, her body had already sprang into action before her thoughts.

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»—Curse Calling!"

The cube transformed into a drill and returned to Fear's hands with a wave of the chain. Holding it at waist level in a stance, she advanced forward. Alarmed, Konoha took a leap, the hem of her skirt fluttering elegantly. But how could she be allowed to escape!

"So fast...!"

Fear could hear Konoha murmuring with a frown, her poker face cracking. That's right, so very fast.

Pursuing Konoha, Fear made a thrust with the drill once more. However, Konoha acted as if she had no intention of fighting all along and turned to evade once more. For the demon sword Muramasa to be fleeing continuously, it made her earlier aggressiveness seem like a facade. How unsightly.

Fear predicted Konoha's future position and launched the drill from her hand.

Her enemy stopped at the sight of the deadly weapon flying before her. In that very instant, Fear took another step forward and retrieved her weapon at the same time by tugging the chain of cubes. Then she prepared to use the drill to pierce that—



"Guh!"

"Oh? —Isn't that quite a pleasant posture you have there, haha!"

Her hands imbued with the sharpness of blades, Konoha captured the front tip of the drill between her palms.

"This is the traditional street performance of disarming weapons with bare hands...! Still, this is the first time I'm disarming a drill...!"

"A street performance? Cool!"

"...Very well, let me ask you. What are you thinking right now?"

The tip of the revolving drill pressed its way towards her heart. Konoha could not be unaware of that, yet still she stared directly into Fear's eyes as she spoke.

"What am I thinking? Needless to say, of course it is the type of scream you will be making. There is no need to offer mercy to enemies. Drilling through those massive udders of yours will prove to be such an exhilarating experience! Haha, how I look forward to it!"

"...Eh, so the result is this? Although I knew it from the start... Just an interrogation tool that only knows how to slaughter, abuse and devour others. That is what you are."

Konoha sighed with her shoulders slumped. What on earth was going on? Idiot—in the instant Fear decided to push her weapon further—Konoha's murderous intent vanished completely.

As Fear frowned, Konoha suddenly shifted her gaze. She was looking behind Fear.

"Ah, it's Haruaki-kun. He is completely shocked!"

Fear felt the wedge and pain in her heart expand instantly.

He saw it again! He saw it again? It's here again? It's here again! The me from that time has been seen again!

"No—No!"

The instant Fear looked back, Konoha lightly turned her wrists, sending into the ground the spinning drill she had been clamping in her hands. Its

tip immobilized, the drill spun in one spot, causing Fear to roll around on the ground.

Frantically, Fear got up on her feet but Konoha simply blew into her palms.

"Ah~ So painful~ Spinning drills are truly deadly things."

"Haru... Haruaki, where is he?"

"Oh, that? I tricked you."

"Wha—"

"In other words, everything was meant to trick you. No matter what, you can't kill someone simply because the sight offends the eyes. That said, in order to make the performance more convincing, I did try recreating my former appearance."

As she smiled mischievously, Fear asked in shock:

"You—Cow tits! What were you intending to do just now?"

"So, let me ask you instead. What were you intending to do just now?"

Konoha continued to smile, but her tone of voice remained forceful.

"What have I done today—Like I said, I've watched you the entire day. I was observing you all this time, observing to see ultimately what your true self is. But I still have no answer. During the day, you really behaved completely like a pure and innocent child."

"Who... Who are you calling a child! I'll curse you!"

"Let me finish. Then there is what happened earlier. The assault of an intruder—You attacked your opponent using full strength without any mercy or hesitation. Even though you denied it, but based on my observation... You were really trying to kill the other person."

"Wha...! Nothing... like that..."

"Even if that was not your intention, that was what your subconscious made happen. This is also an issue. Then I have no idea. What is your true nature? Reflexively displaying murderous intentions when facing enemies, is that the real you? Or is it the one smiling leisurely during the day? Because I can't figure it out, I decided to confirm with my own eyes through

forceful measures. Which is what surfaced just now. That was the real you."

"Ah—"

Understanding what Konoha was trying to say, Fear bowed her head in surprise.

"It was just like the fight on the roof. Because you recognize Haruaki-kun, you can still maintain a certain level of rationality, so you have improved a lot compared to last time... Nevertheless, you're still the same. You haven't escaped your past self, the screams, the battles, the power. Who knows if you might make the same mistake again, on some occasion... And attack Haruaki-kun again."

"Something... like that! I will not... Definitely... Never again..."

"I agree, that is what you think in your heart. This is the truth. However, I would also like to confirm whether you can adhere to that resolve. Resolve does not necessarily equate to reality. I basically heard the gist of what you two were conversing about in the bathroom. You have decided to stay here, that's very good. No one will interfere with that. However, you have to know—resolve does not equate to reality!"

Her words were delivered with great emphasis in one breath.

"As said previously, more enemies will probably arrive in the future. Even if they don't come today, who knows when they might arrive. When the time comes, will you be able to maintain control and protect your resolve? Based on my judgment—"

Facing Fear who was sitting sprawled on the ground, Konoha whispered. Giving up on her, Konoha quietly stated:

"You are unable to protect it. You are too dangerous."

"...!"

"If an enemy appears in the future, I would advise you not to fight. No, truly, you cannot be allowed to fight. Embraced by the illusion known as your past self, you are irrevocably cursed to be unable find a new life."

"You are telling me... Not to fight... Yes?"

Fear spoke quietly as she stared at the leaves on the ground. Lifelessly, like an abandoned child.

"Neither allowed to fight, nor to flee... Then what should I do?"

"Who knows, just do whatever. At least I will be protecting Haruaki-kun, so don't you worry."

Konoha declared mercilessly and walked away, leaving Fear in shock.

Unable to look up, the cube girl kept her head bowed, trembling continuously.

As she walked through the uninhabited forest, Konoha looked up at the moon with a tired expression.

"Was I acting too harsh... Sigh~~"

Clearly there was no one watching but she still tapped her head lightly in a stale manner.

"I know. In the end, since Haruaki-kun is too nice—the one who ends up protecting that child will be me. However... I can't state things too plainly. She is my rival after all."

Just as she murmured to herself, she suddenly halted her steps as she sensed a certain presence. The nervousness only lasted an instant. Sighing, she pretended not to have noticed the presence.

"...What a night owl you are."

Part 10

Quietly, she grabbed the black device. The instant she made contact with that icy-cold sensation, fear ran along her spine uncontrollably. Unlike the times when she was assaulted by enemies, or when she realized she was planning to hurt someone she had no wish to harm, this was another sort of fear. Gripping the device tightly, shrinking her shoulders, she endured it.

After deliberating, she slowly pressed the buttons on the keypad of the device.

This is fine. This will be fine. Such thoughts ran through her mind.

After pressing eleven digits, she finally pushed the big green button. Trembling, she pressed her finger down.

"..."

Nothing happened. How strange, wasn't this the way it was done? During the day, she had asked him in a roundabout manner to teach her. Once again, she tried. She still remembered the numbers, once more—

"I forgot to mention, if there's no dial tone, the call won't connect."

"...!"

The boy, who appeared out of the shadows in the corridor, watched Fear with a calm expression.

"You're... awake?"

"After something like that happened, how could I possibly fall asleep immediately? Let me ask you the same question. You've been up ever since?"

"...Yes. Because I've been thinking, what kind of expression I should face you with..."

"So you heard the telephone number as well. Since Class Rep memorized it too, I guess it was easy enough for you who was able to learn Japanese in a matter of days."

Fear returned the cordless phone to the charger silently, her head bowed. Haruaki glanced at the phone.

"I know you two went outside, so I secretly followed. I saw and heard everything. Konoha probably noticed me. Then I had this ominous premonition, so while you were hanging your head in low spirits, I went home and pulled out the telephone cord."

"...I see."

"You're going to look for those people?"

Passive turned into active. Silence gave way to words. Everything changed as if reflected backwards.

"That's right! I-I... am too dangerous. That's what she said, and I know it of course—ultimately, I'm just a tool for murder! It is only natural for her to tell

me not to fight. Who knows when I would act like on the roof back then, going insane and attacking you! But now, I'm simply a protected existence... No, rather, something even worse than that! I am simply... An existence that embroils you into danger! In that case, I might as well—!"

"What kind of joke is this...! When did I ever say I felt troubled or annoyed? Don't you want to stay here?"

"Of course I do! But it won't work out! You will come to harm! I hurt people when I'm insane, and even when I'm not insane! This is only natural, because I am a tool created for the purpose of hurting others!"

"Who says it won't work out, don't decide that on your own..."

"Don't come near!"

Fear took out the Rubik's Cube, instantly transforming it into her virtual self. It was the great long axe she had used to repel the intruder.

"—Idiot! What are you thinking, taking that thing out?"

Haruaki said. Fear looked down at the bladed weapon with hollow eyes.

"Ah... yes. I will use this, might as well swing it at my own neck. Or maybe I should climb into the Iron Maiden, that would work too. Within that person's proposal, there should be this option."

"Stop it... You're not acting normal!"

Haruaki stepped forward. Surprised, Fear held out her weapon in fright.

"The one who's not normal is you! No matter how you look at it, abandoning me is the proper decision. Why? Someone like me, someone who might go insane at any time... Aren't you afraid...?"

"—Of course, if I were afraid, would I do all this?"

"!"

Calmly approaching her, Haruaki grabbed the blade of Fear's axe. Of course, he did it barehanded.

«A Hatchet of Lingchi» was the form taken for slicing humans to pieces. Cutting off ears, noses, breasts, slowly dismembering human bodies, meanwhile savoring their painful screams, this was the executioner's axe that sentenced victims to a slow death—hence this blade was capable of

turning Haruaki's fingers into mere scraps of flesh straight away, in accordance with its reason for existing—All it required was a minute flick of her wrist.

"Idiot, what are you doing...!"

"See, there's nothing to be afraid of, right?"

"Hands off!"

"If you want me to let go, promise me never to do anything stupid, dummy!"

Threatened in this incomprehensible manner. Submitting to the force of his will, one she could not understand, Fear was mentally overwhelmed.

As if waiting for this opportunity, only now did Haruaki smile.

"Back in the bathroom, I already mentioned, right? It's fine if you want to stay. There is no need to be concerned with anything else. That's all there is to it. I am not afraid of you, so stop saying that you are causing me trouble."

"But..."

"I will be at risk, but in reality, didn't we easily repel the enemy? Even if you didn't do that, I believe Konoha more than likely will... By the way, I forgot to tell you, try not to make her angry. Although I was only watching from afar, once she really switches to that mode, it's no joking matter."

As if speaking ill of someone behind their back, Haruaki furtively looked around as he spoke. He was completely right—Fear was finally able to understand—only at this time did she relax her tense shoulders.

"I... Am quite a burden..."

"I am truly the burden."

"I can't do anything."

"You came here for the purpose to learn how to do many things, right? Sweeping, laundry, cooking, as well as common sense, there's tons waiting for you to learn. If you give up halfway, I'm not going to be pleased. If you don't want to be a burden, then work harder!"

Even though she did not completely accept his words yet, she finally abandoned the notion of escaping from this home.

The reason was Haruaki's overwhelming stupidity. In order to escape here, she must pay the expensive toll of his finger. Too expensive! She could not afford to pay that.

"Got it... I got it. I'm not going to run away. So take your hand away..."

"Really?"

"Really."

Haruaki moved his hand away. Fear breathed a sigh of relief and turned the weapon back to its toy form. But at this very moment, she noticed Haruaki nonchalantly hiding his hand behind his back.

"Show me that!"

Forcefully, she grabbed his hand and pulled it out to see. His finger was bleeding slightly.

"Oh, it's nothing really. Completely not your fault, it's my carelessness! It doesn't hurt either, so if it wasn't so visible, I wouldn't even have noticed. Sigh, I didn't even notice~~ Not even one tiny bit!"

What a poor liar. He must have hurt himself when he was holding the axe blade. Even without Fear making any movement, simply the slight shaking of his arm by a few millimeters was enough to cause this kind of wound.

(What a moron... This guy..."

What she found the most stupid about him was not the fact he got hurt but his trying to hide it. His expression did not change a tiny bit, nor did he moan at all. He simply smiled as he tried to cover it up. Why?

(Was it for me...? ...He hurt himself for my sake, so he didn't want me to feel responsible... To avoid screaming and making me go mad...)

The possibility of going crazy from a scream caused by this level of injury was extremely low. Nevertheless... Nevertheless, he still hid it. Fear felt a warm yet painful sensation surge in her heart. Hence—

"This was just my clumsiness, you don't have to mind... Ah, hey!"

Sucking on his finger, she tried to lick the wound. Not for a crazy reason like a desire for fresh blood, but because she felt like doing so for no particular reason. She simply wanted to soothe his wound with some affection.

Her soft tongue and lips surrounded the flesh of his finger. The sound of saliva sucking could be heard as she focused on licking. Feeling his finger twitch in her mouth, she mobilized her tongue further to reassure him.

"Hmm... Like this... How do you feel...?"

"Umm, ah... Hmm mmm. Thanks—It'll be fine with a band-aid next! Uh—"

"I know. I won't make any phonecall, nor will I go anywhere."

"I... I see. Good. Then go to sleep!"

For some reason, Haruaki was blushing and he seemed frantic as he went to the living room. Noisily, he searched through the compartments of the first aid box. Standing on the side, Fear watched from afar as he wrapped a band-aid around his finger.

At the same time, she recalled the sense of immorality she tasted on her tongue—as well as the warmth from his finger.

Then.

Only today. Just only for today.

A great deal of unease lingered. Could she really stay here? What should she do?

There was no solution that could completely satisfy her. As soon as she thought too deeply, she felt an overwhelming feeling as if being crushed.

To be honest, it was quite scary. So only for today.

She wanted to rely on something to fall asleep.

She wanted to experience with her entire body that warmth lingering on her tongue—

"Hmm... Huh?"

"Tsk. You woke up?"

".....! Fear! Why are you squeezing your way into someone else's futon—Yo!"

He was getting noisy, so she used her hands to cover his mouth.

"So noisy, shut up. I'll curse you, moron! Listen here, this is... This is... Yes, this is to protect you! Don't get the wrong idea! It is an emergency measure only for today! Just in case, the enemy side might think they tricked us into thinking they won't come again, so they could appear any time unexpectedly!"

"I-I don't get what you mean...?"

"Like I said, that... In case the enemy appears... If I hide in the futon, they will be very surprised!"

"Definitely, it will be very surprising... Namely, I will jump in surprise!"

"S-Shut up! It's not like I want to do this, but I can't leave things to that rotten cow-tits. I am left with no choice but this less than ideal solution—So that's the situation. You hurry and sleep! Hmph!"

Then Fear refused all conversation and curled herself into a ball with her back towards Haruaki. Sighing helplessly towards her silver hair, Haruaki's heart was filled with worry.

"It can't be helped... But only for today."

Then he turned around. Fear could tell they were now back to back.

A rhythm was transmitted. Thump. Thump.

Was her own heartbeat transmitted over to him in the same way? Thinking that to herself, somehow Fear felt a sense of reassurance.

Feeling uncomfortable in his sleep, Haruaki suddenly opened his eyes wide. Somehow, Fear had fallen asleep soundly while clutching his chest tightly.

(Ooh... Things have gotten worse...)

He tried to pull her off but did not succeed. After struggling for a while—

"Mmm... Mmm~~"

She was uttering strange words in her sleep. He looked downwards.

What he saw was a face with tears in the corners of her eyes. Like a lost child who finally found the mother, holding tight desperately as if never letting go, fearing wholeheartedly of getting lost again and separated

again—that was the kind of expression she had, that of hope mixed with worry.

(Well well...)

Haruaki lightly caressed her silver hair with his fingertips. Such softness to the touch.

Mmm hmm—Fear moaned in her throat as she tightened her grip slightly.

Haruaki silently smiled wryly—and gave up freeing himself from these shackles.

Truly powerless, an ordinary human who could not do anything. Or—

An ordinary human who could at least act as a substitute body pillow.

Which one was superior, the choice was obvious.

Chapter 5 - Even If Cursed / "Here"

Part 1

Her silver hair tousled by sleep, the girl sat up. Half opening her eyes, she stared blankly without moving. She was still stuck halfway in the world of dreams.

Suddenly, her vision captured a mysterious object. Slowly she blinked, tilting her head in puzzlement. Several seconds later, she inclined her head in the opposite direction. Then she mumbled the name of the object she saw.

"...A tent?"

Incomprehensible. Incomprehensible.

Sleepily, Fear continued to sit comfortably, swaying her upper torso as she approached the object with her face.

Then.

Poke poke.

"Muah...?"

The nearby snoring transformed into a strange moan.

Poke poke.

Fear murmured, still half asleep:

"...Hard."

Poke poke.

The sound of someone springing up suddenly.

"Stop poking—!"

In any case, the day began rather leisurely except for the moment of awakening.

"Hey, what on earth was that phenomenon just now—"

"Don't ask!"

Despite this sort of awkward conversation, breakfast ended rather unhurriedly because it was Sunday.

After that, just as they were enjoying their free time after the meal, a guest arrived.

"So, Konoha, is there something you want to talk about?"

"Just as I mentioned yesterday, we need a strategy meeting. To discuss our future plans. In actual fact, we should have discussed this sooner. But—too many things happened."

Sipping tea, she threw a glance at Fear who was hugging her knees, watching television. She seemed to be ignoring Konoha's presence and did not shift her gaze at all.

"Those people might not be coming again. After all, they not only failed twice but both of them are also injured."

"Rather than speculating they won't be back, wouldn't it be more appropriate to assume they will return? You can't bet your life on optimism."

"You're right. But even if you ask me what to do..."

Haruaki was facing Konoha as he drank tea.

"At the end of the day, the best solution is to 'make them not return,' isn't that right? If we contact the organization supporting them... That Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion, right? To convey our message clearly—"

"It'll be very difficult. Just look at that woman in a dress, clearly she is an opponent who cannot be communicated with like a human. Besides, we know basically nothing about that organization nor how to contact them. Only Honatsu-san would probably know?"

"My old man... I do talk to him on the phone from time to time, but just as usual, I can't reach him at the moment."

"Is he okay?"

"He is essentially unkillable. Anyway, relying on my old man is no good and we can't possibly negotiate with the backing organization. Then that leaves... What was mentioned last time, we go on the offensive? Once we find their base, perhaps we could also obtain information about their

organization. But the problem remains the same, we don't know where it is."

"...Right. We must start with their hiding place but that presents many challenges. A blanket search would be foolhardy. Besides, it needs to be carried out in secret, which means I'm probably the only one who could undertake it. In that case, this home would become defenseless. Leaving Haruaki and this child alone at home would be too dangerous."

Fear's shoulders twitched. She was probably reacting to the mention of "this child"? By "dangerous," Konoha probably meant it in more than one way.

"Even if we know their location, what could we do to force them to submit? That is also quite a dangerous task, which makes me think Konoha is the only one we could rely on. I certainly can't bring myself to do it... In that case, we've gone full circle, back to waiting passively for them to come?"

"Sigh... It ended up being that again... Whatever, I expected it as the most likely outcome in the first place. The problem is we need to go to school tomorrow. What should we do?"

"I am also troubling over that. We can't leave her alone to watch the house, but neither can we take her to school. I guess we'll have to be absent from school for now..."

"But who knows if we need to be absent for a week or even a month? We can't just apply for leave indefinitely? So we're back to the same dilemma."

"That's true..."

Haruaki suddenly looked at the garden. He was reminded of the other tenant who shared the detached accessory dwelling with Konoha.

"Wait till Kuroe returns, then the situation would be different. How about we ask her for help?"

"Ah, I already called her shop yesterday, but she didn't pick up. I think she's probably wandering somewhere again."

"That's so similar to my old man, I guess she has vagabond tendencies too... This is really no good for an urgent crisis."

At this time, Fear who had remained silent until now, went "...Television is so boring today" and got up, intending to return to her own room. However—

"—Wait up." With a rather serious voice, Konoha stopped Fear from walking away.

"It's fine if you don't know what to do right now. But if you continue to remain clueless, it'd be quite meaningless. You should at least try to think."

"...I have been thinking."

"Liar. You have stopped thinking and turned to escapism. You are simply repeating 'What should I do? What should I do?' to yourself as you tremble in fear. Clearly when contemplation is the only choice left, but you do not even want to think—that is proof that you are still a child, completely hopeless."

"Uh—Konoha-san? I don't really understand, but could you be a little more calm, please?"

"Haruaki-kun, please be quiet."

For his personal safety, Haruaki chose silence.

Immersed in this prickly silence, Fear took a deep breath as if about to say something—

"..."

But she could not voice it out. Swallowing air, she started walking as if escaping to her room. At that very instant.

Konoha's eyes widened into a stare as she grabbed the dinner table before them.

Maintaining her sitting posture, she threw the table at Fear using just her upper body strength.

"Uwah!"

Haruaki was just about to place his teacup on the table when he frantically lifted it again. Konoha must be furious. Definitely furious. This was going to be pandemonium. To prevent anyone from getting hurt, Haruaki was just about to step forward to restrain the two girls when—!

The table's edge brushed past Fear as it flew into the garden in the distance, producing a cloud of dirt.

"Y-You, what are you doing! Are you trying to pick a fight against me again—"

As if she failed to hear Fear's angry shout, Konoha swiftly stood up and moved in front of Haruaki.

The sound barrier could be heard broken several times. Followed by the sound of an equal number of impacts.

As Konoha stood before Haruaki, several objects fell down between her legs.

Shattered bullets.

"I knew it, relying on lead bullets to defeat you isn't going to work... Though it'd really spoil the fun if such a toy was able to obtain victory so easily."

The voice came from the table buried in the soil of the garden.

Standing gracefully on one of the table legs like some sort of conjurer, it was a woman in a stylish black dress—

"It's been a while since we last met, bitches. Have you prepared yourself for your rotten guts to be splashed out in the open?"

Then she took a deep bow. With that, Haruaki and his group's strategy meeting became totally pointless.

Part 2

"An attack... In the middle of the day!"

"Damn it, you should have said so earlier! I thought you were trying to start a fight with me again!"

"I wanted to say, I wouldn't mind if the table really collided with you."

"What did you say?!"

"You two... Now is not the time to argue... Woah!"

Another volley of bullets were fired, but Konoha blocked them using her body.

"It's fine. Aren't humans the same? When they tense up their body to the max, their muscles become hard? In our case, the sturdiness approaches our original forms."

Konoha slowly walked off the porch while Haruaki and Fear watched as they stood on the porch.

"Hmm. I brought them along just as a test, but since they didn't work, these are nothing but ordinary lumps of lead eh..."

Holding a cigarette between her lips, Peavey muttered as she threw away the gun in her hand. Then she stuffed her hand down the chest opening of her new dress—between her cleavage, taking out another gun and tossed it away too. She no longer wore that massive armor on her arm, baring her heavily scarred skin for all to see. On her back she was carrying a strange package wrapped in cloth. Her appearance was quite different compared to last time on the roof.

Appearances were not all that had changed. Rather, her greatest change was the aura around her.

Too calm, too composed.

She was not in the impatient state filled with mocking laughter when they first met. Neither did she display the state of depression like an emotionless ghost when her arm had been severed. Currently, she was swaying her body like a ghost but speaking like a noble and sneering with derision—

Why did this change come over her? Who knew. Perhaps because of that, it seemed even more eerie.

(This woman... Why... Why is she so calm...?)

Instinctively, an unfamiliar sense of fear was rushing along Haruaki's spine.

Humans feared what they could not comprehend. That's right, incomprehensibility. This was purely incomprehensible. A noblewoman who laughed maniacally while engaging in destruction was terrifying. A ghost that swayed expressionlessly was also terrifying. But currently, the intermediate existence that belonged to neither, surpassed the other two and aroused overwhelming, unmatched horror—to the point one could not even understand why it was so terrifying—thereby creating additional fear—an endless cycle of incomprehensibility and fear.

Haruaki watched Peavey as if she were a monster of indeterminate form.

"How incredible this feeling... As soon as my emotions are roused, my body sways, making it impossible to speak properly. Hence together with the armor on my arms, I was called the 'Balancing Toy.' Now I feel the same thing the instant I lay my eyes on that trash cube, however—For some reason, my mind is quite lucid. A first experience. Perhaps because I have waited so long for this, and the opportunity has finally arrived... Is it due to that sort of joy?"

Her voice did not sound like it carried much spirit. She simply chattered quietly, her words so calm it felt rather eerie.

Slightly relaxing her expression, she turned her gaze towards Fear who was standing on the porch.

"Well then... Let me quote this line: 'You wouldn't happen to believe in the existence of God?' You didn't think I wouldn't return, right? Unfortunately, even if the date for the trash cube's dismantling is postponed, it will not be cancelled."

"You... What are you talking about... For someone of your level, I'm just going to take that other arm of yours and simply—"

Fear swallowed her words as soon as she started speaking, then frowned and lowered her gaze. Haruaki noticed Konoha was glaring sharply at her.

"Oh my, are you afraid of something? But by this juncture if you were to behave like some kind of believer in non-resistance, it would simply be ludicrous to the extreme... 'Do it! Simply stated, just do it!' Just as the Marquis de Sade wrote, I am simply doing it."

Once again, Haruaki instinctively felt horror and eeriness along his spine. But he could not remain silent.

"...How do you think you'll accomplish that? You have only one arm remaining and no longer have that strange armor. For your own good you'd better give up. Go back to where you came from."

"I can't help it if that is what you think. However, the only reason I'm not wearing that—is because I can't wield this if I wear the armor. After all, its effects cannot manifest without direct contact."

Peavey spoke as she unwrapped the cloth around the package on her back.

A double-edged axe was revealed. A thick and sturdy axe blade, curved ominously with a sharp spike on its tip. A rectangular object resembling a remote control was attached to the shaft near the grip, but Haruaki could not discern its purpose. In any case, he knew that the axe was a weapon that did not lose to the armor in any way, and an equally poor match for the dress.

"This time your weapon is that axe?"

"Yes. We call it «Dance Time». Although I had no intention of using it in the beginning, hoho, it can't be helped now, having lost my aaaarm, aaarghhhh..."

"I"

Originally smiling as she chatted, Peavey suddenly turned to the side and began to vomit inexplicably.

While she vomited a number of times, Haruaki and the rest could only feel bewilderment.

"Hoo... Ah~ I apologize for my unsightliness. Though I have resolved myself, as expected, it's not that easy to dispel my revulsion for Wathes."

"You're saying that's a cursed tool? Why—"

"There exist those in the Knights' Dominion who uses them. In order to destroy the most abysmal tools, there really is no choice. For heavily cursed Wathes, one has no choice but to rely on the Indulgence Disks."

"Indulgence...?"

"...Oh my, how careless of me to divulge that term. In any case, I have no choice but to twist my principles. Since I must rely on this to destroy that trash cube."

"If you hate it so much you want to puke, then just don't use it..."

Hearing Haruaki groan, Peavey shrugged nonchalantly.

"If it weren't for this situation, you are completely right. Holding this kind of object truly makes me want to vomit. I haven't touched a single one of them for ten-odd years now... Hohoho, not since my father obtained that whip from an antique shop."

"A cursed... Whip, is it?"

Haruaki muttered softly. Peavey nodded:

"Given the current situation, let me give you a few clues. There was once a father who ran a farm; a whip cursed with the desire to abuse victims until they could no longer move, ultimately leading to their deaths; as well as me and my mother who were always being scolded and beaten by the strict father... Under such conditions, I'm sure with a little bit of thought, you can easily deduce why I hate Wathes so much. Even though it created this habit of mine."

"..."

"Fine, enough with the chitchat. I've replenished my nicotine too, so it's about time to start."

Spitting out the cigarette butt, Peavey stepped forward.

"Sorry, Konoha..."

"Hoo... I knew it. You couldn't possibly stand back or not interfere."

"Obviously, how could I possibly not interfere! But I'm just a powerless ordinary person. I have no right to ask you for a favor, so my only choice is to beg you willfully. So please! I'm really sorry about this—to the extent I even want to kneel down before you, kowtowing until my forehead bleeds from striking the ground..."

"No problem. After all, I already knew that is the kind of person you are, Haruaki-kun."

She sounded like she had already accepted things. With an exhausted tone of voice, she spoke as she walked near Haruaki.

"Fear, you—"

"You stand further back. Don't do anything, you understand?"

Konoha said sharply. Fear looked like she was about to object reflexively but in the end, she stood there with her head bowed.

"Understood... Okay. Dummy..."

A weak voice, sounding as if coming from a child who was about to cry. By the time she finished her sentence, Konoha's clothes had already fallen to the ground as Haruaki held a Japanese sword in his hand.

"We're starting from this side? Very well. Let's begin the duel!"

"...A duel is fine. But I hope the other person won't be showing up to interfere."

Haruaki did not expect an honest response, but Peavey went "Eh?" as she tilted her head slightly.

"Mummy Maker...? Speaking of which, she did contact you earlier after all. Don't worry, that child will not be causing any trouble here."

"I really hope I can believe in your words."

"Because she is already dead. Sentenced to death for betrayal, as well as—food for this axe!"

The start of the fight was announced by sudden footsteps. With unbelievable force and speed, the heavy axe blade came crashing despite being wielded with one arm. Only with great desperation did Konoha manage to block this attack.

"Food? —You killed her?"

"Yes, because she was too meddlesome. Besides, making use of this axe's taboo power requires using it for murder, to grant it fresh blood. The timing was perfect."

"Aren't you comrades!?"

"Yes. But my mission is to destroy Wathes, while hers is to assist me. There is no contradiction here."

Haruaki could not help but feel goosebumps all over. No good, he could tell simply from her eyes. This woman clearly believed wholeheartedly there was no contradiction.

"Very well, let's dance, Dance Time... Now is the time to live up to your name. I have given you vigor, given you fresh blood. Let me dance until I go mad, until screams of death signal the end like the ringing of a bell!"

The battle axe descended straight down as if trying to split the Earth into halves. Blocking this hit, one had to find an opening in the enemy—

"A solid hit... Yes? ...!"

Konoha initially thought Peavey had been caught by the black scabbard, but in the next instant, she hastily aborted the attack. Withdrawing the sword, she defended at the last second the sweeping axe that aimed for Haruaki's body.

"Are you mad? Do you not care about mutual defeat? How could you?!"

"Actually I'd like to ask instead, are you mad? How could I possibly care about that? Precisely because I didn't care, that was why I chose this Wathe—this axe never stops attacking. Whether I am injured or not, this axe will continue to dance for the sake of defeating the enemy. That's right, even if it means death. Never stopping until the enemy is defeated!"

"...? You must be joking... You're crazy!"

Haruaki completely agreed. The cursed axe only knew to slash at Haruaki continually. A vertical chopping attack, a horizontal sweeping attack, a diagonal severing attack, a forward piercing attack!

"Huff... Huff..."

"Haruaki-kun, are you okay?"

Though there was no problem with the agility of his body, the actions performed under Konoha's control were unfamiliar to his body, and naturally strained his muscles, resulting in the accumulation of fatigue. Nevertheless, Haruaki had no wish of showing any signs of weakness.

"Yes, I'm fine. Konoha, I have a suggestion. Use the 'Sword-Kill Counter'... Since she won't stop even if she dies, then simply destroy the axe itself."

"...Understood. Her movements are very hard to predict, so it might take some time. Furthermore, this will reduce my focus on defense, so please be careful!"

"Okay! I believe in my reflexes!"

Haruaki could feel the sword become slightly heavier. Even though it still reacted in accordance to the trajectories of the battle axe, he felt that it was simply moving but required his input for precise adjustments. Furthermore, the power available when parrying attacks also felt slightly inadequate. Haruaki consciously tensed his muscles and gritted his teeth as he endured the weight of the battle axe. No problem. However—

(Hmm... I have to bear it!)

The part of his arm where he had injured at school was beginning to ache. This was the only anxiety factor.

Displaying cold and merciless eyes, Peavey repeatedly attacked. At the same time, she muttered:

"This is getting rather troublesome. Why push yourself to this extent? What reason do you have to protect that thing?"

"Who cares—Reasons are not needed!"

Haruaki did not know if she was starting a conversation as part of some sort of trickery. Just as he expected the axe to continue its wave of attacks, it suddenly stopped. Even though the battle axe only knew how to attack automatically in continuous succession, its repertoire also included feints. Konoha with her immense combat experience keenly discerned it, but—

(This was bad...)

Unversed in swordsmanship, Haruaki could not handle it. As the axe blade changed directions and approached, Haruaki felt a chill down his spine. Just at that very instant—

Haruaki thought he had dropped the sword out of fear and confusion. But that was not the case. The weight disappeared from his hands because the sword had been unsheathed with incredible speed.

"—Sword-Kill Counter!"

Part 3

Meanwhile—Walking along a peaceful street on Sunday, a girl was currently making her way towards a certain destination.

For no special reason in particular. However, having no reason at all would be awkward, so she thought up a random reason.

"Yes. That guy was skipping school yesterday. Even though he called a little while later to say he caught a cold, he was definitely skipping school, no mistake about it. How dare him! As the class representative, I must give him a warning... Also, today happens to be the first holiday after that kind of incident happened. As one in the know, it is only natural to check up on the situation—There!"

Ueno Kirika was murmuring alone, nodding to herself.

Suddenly, she halted her steps as she saw her own reflection on a display window she passed by. Even she found the sight of herself dressed in a casual skirt to be strange and unfamiliar. Even during PE lessons, she would never wear anything but a full tracksuit. Exposing her legs made her feel embarrassed, and also carried a certain risk—

"After all, it's Sunday and the first time for us to meet during a holiday. Dressing like this once in a while would be nice. That's simply what I think... Is there any other reason? Absolutely ridiculous. That's right, absolutely ridiculous..."

She arranged her hair slightly, smoothed the creases in her skirt and nervously adjusted the angle of her collar.

That uneasy attitude of hers would probably cause any onlooker to smile knowingly and think to themselves, "This girl must be heading off to a date, right?" Kirika started walking again.

Heading towards the Yachi residence.

Part 4

As blade collided with blade, both sides were sent far apart.

Haruaki looked in surprise at the axe wielded by Peavey. It appeared unaffected.

"What happened, Konoha?"

"Ooh... I—couldn't help it."

"W-Why?"

"I miscalculated. That axe is 'autonomous.' Of course, the wielder's body is also moving, but only as support, similar to us. But the Sword-Kill Counter relies on finding openings through predicting the attacker's habits or muscle movement, hence—"

"After all, the target's weak point has to be targeted with precision as fine as a hair..."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault... Anyway, she looks like she intends to keep going?"

The axe seemed to be convulsing as if impatient for slaughter. Peavey held the axe as she slowly approached.

"Impossible, this is too unbelievable. You can't possibly be gambling away your own life on a flimsy reason such as 'just because you want to' or the like?"

She resumed the previous conversation. Haruaki adjusted his breathing as he glared at her.

"...Then let me correct myself. It's not like there isn't a reason."

"Oh? Is it something like love one would harbor towards a doll? Or a sense of possessiveness towards a machine?"

"—It's the sense of guilt."

Haruaki could feel the sword in his hand shudder once slightly.

"So you feel guilty if you stand back and watch them meet their demise? How strange. Even though they have taken human appearances and possess the ability to move and talk, they are simply tools."

"Stop talking nonsense. These girls are not tools—and neither am I referring to the kind of guilt you're talking about. Of course, what you described is included to some extent... But it's a different sense of guilt."

Sighing, Haruaki said:

"—The ones who cursed them, are us, humans!"

His hand gripping the sword was full of power.

"We are the cause of their condition. We are the ones who cursed them arbitrarily. Considering things from their perspective, humans are probably the ones who deserve contempt. Why turn me into this!? —I definitely would be crying out as hard as I could. However... Consequently—At least... Even if they hate us, as long as any of these fellows come here to rely on humans, I wish to help them as much as I can."

In the past, definitely... But now.. I really love... Truly.

Haruaki could vaguely hear the sword giving off this sort of faint voice... As if suppressing some kind of murmur.

"And then, if these fellows were to believe 'humans are not so bad after all' or 'isn't it wonderful to become human~'... If they really wish to believe that more or less—wouldn't it be nice? At least it makes me feel some level of absolution! Of course, this is only an illusion, I know that! This cannot compensate for all of humanity's crimes, but—those who are at least aware of humanity's culpability... Knowing that we are culpable, if I don't do this, our crimes will simply persist forever! Perhaps what I'm doing might be meaningless, however... Right! In the end, I'm doing it because I want to! So what!?"

Roaring angrily, Haruaki poured out all the thoughts in his mind.

As for Peavey, her response carried neither anger nor jeering laughter—

"...How disgusting!"

It was simple revulsion. As if staring at rotten trash, she vomited once again.

"Urrghh... My apologies, boy, but your speech has caused me to reevaluate you as trash on the same level as Wathes. Ah, how unbearable, how vomit inducing, truly it is too disgusting...!"

Peavey approached once more, as if unable to suppress the axe's desire.

Thus, Haruaki was forced to play the role of her dance partner again. Her attacks were full of openings. But if one were to take advantage of these openings to attack, the instant Peavey was struck, the resulting automatic counterattack would prevent Haruaki from withdrawing unscathed.

This was stalemate at best. If this continued, Haruaki's stamina would be depleted. Furthermore, there was a negative factor that Haruaki had been deliberately ignoring, but whose presence was becoming increasingly obvious. As if released from floodgates, pain flooded the sensations of his arm.

His lungs suffered as they struggled for air, his heart was beating violently, his muscles screamed from overload, his brain began to imagine a dark future on its own. Everything was deteriorating. Deteriorating. Deteriorating. Truly deteriorating to the worst situation.

(Damn it! What should I do...!)

He sought a path of survival but could not see anything. His ears were only filled with the noise of repeated impacts of iron and steel, the metallic clanging continuing on and on—This was almost like—

The sounds of an ominous bell, ringing to declare closure of a party.

Part 5

Meanwhile, Fear watched all this unfold. The sight of Haruaki breathing irregularly, dripping with sweat, gambling his life to cross blades with his enemy.

What about herself? Staring blankly down at her hands, thinking about nothing.

Her breathing was calm. Only sweating slightly. Naturally, she was not risking her life either.

"Is this okay...?"

She asked herself. How could this be okay? For whose sake were they fighting for? The answer was obvious.

But—she clenched her fists. Within her mind, that woman's unpleasant voice reverberated.

(Truly, you cannot be allowed to fight. You are too dangerous.)

Whenever she recalled how easily she lost herself, whenever she remembered her murderous intent towards the intruder, whenever she thought of how she almost killed Haruaki—she felt a stabbing pain in her heart.

(Absolutely, that... Cannot be allowed to happen again... But...)

She was very dangerous. A dangerous existence. Though she understood that, she could not accept it.

That's right, how could that be acceptable? While unrelated people were fighting, the root cause of the incident, herself, was standing idly aside.

How useless. At the very least, her pride rejected such peace and tranquility. Also, there was her pride as a self-aware being. However—she was forbidden from taking action. Because she understood the danger of action.

"Dangerous...? Heh. Cow Tits is clearly more dangerous than me, to think she could make her eyes look like that..."

She murmured to herself meaninglessly as if in self-mockery.

At this very moment, this comment uttered without conscious intent, suddenly interrupted her spinning thoughts.

If Cow Tits was also very dangerous, then why did Fear have to submit to her on this particular issue?

Recalling her rebellious feelings when she first arrived, Fear recalled pure and simple displeasure. Then one after another, she reminisced everything that had happened—and remembered what occurred in the bath the day before yesterday.

"Hoo..."

She realized. Realized it. The current situation was exactly the same as that time. An exceedingly simple matter.

But at the same time, those words Haruaki had yelled out mere seconds earlier, was once again heard in her mind—

(Perhaps what I'm doing might be meaningless, however... Right! In the end, I'm doing it because I want to! So what!?)

"Ha... Haha... Yes. I don't care if she's right or wrong, why do I have to obey that brawny woman anyway? That's completely unlike me. I do what I want, that's the way I roll!"

What if she turns out to be right? Well, the answer was also very simple—the fact of the matter was, Cow Tits was also very dangerous. Easily argued. Realizing this, the answer was all clear.

Laughing from the depths of her throat, Fear reached into her pocket.

The feeling of the solid cube in her hand, truly what a reliable sensation it was.

"You all have forgotten a very important fact—I am extremely willful!"

Part 6

—It happened suddenly.

"Mechanism No.20 slashing type, great blade form: «A Hatchet of Lingchi», Curse Calling!"

Haruaki saw a silver-white stream flash before his eyes.

As if the contrast of his vision had been reversed, a white and petite figure replaced the woman in a black dress, striking and sending her flying away.

"Fear, you...!"

"Hmm? Oh, I didn't kill her but simply smacked her using the back of the blade. I suppose she must have broken a few bones in the process—only that. Very likely, she can still move."

Fear answered with self-composure. Peavey had been sent flying and her upper torso was buried deeply into the boundary wall. But just as Fear described, there was no bleeding at all.

"You promised me! What are you doing?!"

"I didn't promise you anything, you were only talking on your own, so I will now act as I please. If I start acting strangely—"

Then.

She smiled as she spoke these words.

"Destroy me immediately, because I am very dangerous."

Haruaki and Konoha were unable to understand the meaning of her words in that very instant.

"You should be capable of that, Muramasa Konoha. Of course, I have no intention of losing myself."

"Huh?"

"What—are you trying to say?"

"Hoo... I'm only going to say this once. Muramasa Konoha, I will arbitrarily believe in you. I will believe in your terrible character, the dispassionate self you have kept hidden. Plainly stated, it is that fiendish quality of yours. Yachi Haruaki, I will arbitrarily believe in you. I believe you are an ordinary though hopelessly benevolent person, but in any case, you do sincerely care for my well-being."



The girl who looked back once more was displaying a cheerful expression as if she had realized something.

"In short—If I start acting strangely, my wish is to be destroyed. That will be my happy end. In that event, Haruaki would make my wish come true for the sake of my happiness. Also, when the time comes, the fiendish Cow Tits will take action without hesitation—is that right?"

" "How could that be possible!?" "

Haruaki and Konoha's voices sounded in unison as they knocked Fear on the head with the scabbard. Ouch—Fear covered her head.

"...That hurts! What the heck!"

"I knew you were an idiot already, but I had no idea you were this stupid..."

"That's right... What fiendish quality or terrible character are you talking about? You have no right to say that!"

Fear quietly narrowed her eyes as she traced her gaze along the axe blade she wielded in her hands.

"I know I am very stupid, but I cannot accept any action other than this. I do it because I want to. I am responsible for myself—not a tool to be manipulated by others. The one in control of this body right now is no one but myself."

Haruaki gazed at the sword as it waved slightly vertically.

"Indeed, those are willful words. Then I will declare willfully as well, I ignore your request."

"What did you say!? That... Are you really asking me not to fight...?!"

"Furthermore, I will arbitrarily believe in you. You will continue to fight hard and surely you won't go insane!"

Fear closed her mouth just as she was about to say something. She turned her gaze towards Peavey whose upper torso was still embedded in the wall—in other words, her back was turned towards Haruaki and Konoha.

"Hmph. Believing in not necessary. Because my pride is on the line here, I absolutely won't go insane."

"Very well. So... What should we do now? There's not much time to think."

Debris was falling away noisily from the wall where Peavey was stuck. In other words, she was going to regain mobility soon. The axe lay abandoned at her feet, but her hand was groping around in search of the axe grip. Even though her sight was blocked by the wall, she would probably find the axe almost immediately.

"Then we must create time for planning. Let's hide first!"

Saying that, Fear grabbed Haruaki by the waist, took a running start and jumped high in one go, landing at a certain location—the second floor of the accessory dwelling, through the window of Konoha's room.

"Hey... Wait!"

"Shut up, Cow Tits, or we'll be discovered! Hoho, I must have predicted something like this in advance, which was why I broke the glass. Thanks to that, we are now able to slip inside quietly."

"That is a total lie."

Invading Konoha's room, Fear and Haruaki crouched down just as Peavey's footsteps could be heard outside. Slow steps—she was probably looking out for a surprise attack as she sought her enemy.

"I knew it, even though it can attack on its own, as long as the enemy is out of sight, that power cannot apply itself."

"Right. In any case, we have to plan what we're doing next. How to handle that axe which continues to move even after the wielder is dead. If only we could destroy it, but unfortunately that didn't work. Let's think of another way."

"Based on what happened just now, I've discovered that the axe stops moving as soon as she lets go. I also remember her saying something like, she couldn't use it unless she makes direct contact with it..."

"Then didn't we waste our chance just now? What a waste... Anyway, complaining about it won't help the current situation. Should we ambush her again like just now? While I'm acting as bait, you—"

"She was sent flying just now only because she was completely caught by surprise. The same move probably won't work again. Besides, there's a flaw with that plan."

"What flaw?"

"You're underestimating me! You think I wouldn't notice?"

She slapped him lightly on the arm. Haruaki frantically covered his mouth to suppress the cries he nearly emitted.

"Haruaki-kun? Could your wound on the arm have opened up?"

"Hoo—Looks like there is no point hiding it any further... At first it was still bearable, but after the Sword-Kill Counter was deflected just now, it hurts so much I can't apply any strength... But it's fine, I can still wield the sword."

"But that doesn't mean you are able to block the enemy's attacks. How could your injured arm defend against those attacks of brute force? You're pushing it! That woman probably realized it already. I should act as bait instead. But she would probably attack you first. Which would make things meaningless if you die before or while I take action!"

Even if he wanted to object, there was no room for Haruaki to object.

Haruaki bowed his head and gazed at the sword. Fear also looked down. After a while—

"...I'll go alone."

"You? What are you talking about when things have come to this?! Not only is it meaningless, it is also too dangerous!"

While Konoha objected, Haruaki listened motionlessly. He was pondering what he could do? What should he do?

Then he reached a conclusion.

A cowardly conclusion.

As he gritted his teeth at the thought of his powerlessness, twisting his face out of contempt for his own incompetence—Haruaki muttered softly:

"Yes. Next... Do your best alone."

Part 7

Kirika pressed the door bell. No one answered. Did they go out? Just as she thought that, she sensed the presence of someone in the home.

"Maybe they're doing something in the yard..."

The gate was unlocked. Only deliberating for an instant, she decided to enter the premises.

"Pardon my intrusion... Yachi? Are you home?"

She felt a little nervous. This would be their first encounter during a holiday, and at his home as well. Was there anything strange the way she dressed up? Was her hair okay? She recalled all the reasons she had thought up earlier. Should she greet him with a vigorous "Hi!" or should she go with a humble "Sorry for visiting unannounced"...

Just as various thoughts crossed Kirika's mind as she crossed the side of the main house towards the garden, then—

"Are you a friend of the boy's? You came at the right time. Wonderful."

"...Eh?"

A woman in a black dress mercilessly sent her knee into Kirika's chest.

"Mechanism No.26 piercing type, imprisoning form: «Iron Maiden»—Curse Calling."

In preparation for their next move, Fear exhaled deeply. Lightly caressing the disguised cube which had transformed into an iron maiden, she perked her ears and listened to the situation outside the window, calculating her opportunity for jumping out. At this time—

"Can you hear me? Fear-in-Cube, the boy and the Japanese sword? You would do well to show yourselves now."

"...Who would be foolish enough to heed your call, dummy. You can wait impatiently for all I care!"

But just as Fear muttered to herself—

"Fine, if you don't want to come out, but conversely, I can't guarantee what might happen to this girl here!"

"Wha—?"

Peeping out the window discreetly, Fear found an unbelievable scene unfolding before her eyes.

Holding the axe in one hand, Peavey was smoking with a blank expression. And lying on the ground at her feet was a girl whose stomach was being stepped on forcefully—

"Kirika...! Damn it, why now!?"

"Hmm? Dance Time seems to be unbearably restless. I will now count down from ten seconds. Come out before I reach zero, or else—I may have to decorate this place with a splash of color. Come, ten, nine..."

Fear pressed her hand against her chest to adjust her breathing, calming herself. Even though there was an unexpected crisis, she had to be calm.

"Don't worry, I have to go out there sooner or later... No problem, I'll definitely find a way. I won't let her hurt Kirika. Kirika won't be hurt. Sticking with original plan is fine. Stay calm—"

The countdown reached four. Then three.

"Stop! I'm coming out now, release that girl! She is uninvolved!"

Fear yelled out as she jumped through the window. Landing together with the iron maiden, she glared at the most despicable enemy.

Peavey continued to tilt her head with a listless expression.

"The boy and the sword did not come out, why?"

"Regrettably, I have already sent them away to escape. It's too dangerous to let the wounded face an insane opponent like you."

"Well that truly is unfortunate... I'll have to waste energy hunting them down later. Whatever, after all, the main course is now prepared before me."

"There will be no more dishes served after the main course."

Fear pulled the chain of cubes closer and rested her hand against the iron maiden.

"In my case... I could definitely eliminate you with this thing here. Regardless of whether your attacks continue or not, once you are enveloped by the womb of this maiden, you cannot avoid being cut into pieces of flesh. Turn into a dead foetus for eternity!"

"I don't care what kind of stinking steel womb it is, I will tear its belly apart. Using this Dance Time! Like a dancing baby that keeps going forever!"

"Rubbish—Anyway, that girl is useless to you now, right? Release her."

"Oh my, I almost forgot. But now that you mention it... How unbelievable."

Peavey stepped harder. Tears could be seen welling up in Kirika's eyes as her solar plexus was stepped on.

"S-Stop it! I already came out, release her!"

"This is what I find unbelievable. Since you already made the boy and the sword escape, why didn't you run as well? You must be planning an ambush, right? But why would you show yourself so easily, simply because this girl was taken hostage?"

"How could you say that, simply because a hostage was taken...!"

"That anger of yours is also quite unbelievable. You're not human, right? For a non-human tool to jump out in defense of a human... Are you trying to pretend you are human? Have you forgotten you are a tool that reeks of bloodshed?"

"—I only do what I want to do. Simple as that."

Faced with this curt answer, Peavey snorted with displeasure.

"Then I'll assume your answer is 'Yes.' I already know what kind of home this is and what Yachi's goals are. You are probably trying to lift your curse, right? That is why you are masquerading as a human here, sucking up to humans, trying to obtain absolution for your sins!"

As her tone grew increasingly harsh, her eyes widened at the same time, and on that lifeless face of a ghost's... The face of a ghost born from wrath, was gradually infused with an additional layer of exceptional fury—

"Unforgivable, unforgivable! Tools like you! The things your kind has done to me, my father and mother! The pain, humiliation and immorality that made an utter mess of my family! You dare seek to forget! I will not forgive you for that! I—I will curse your wish to lift your curse, I curse you, I curse you, I curse you!"

"Curse as much as you want."

Fear murmured softly.

"Wha—"

"I have no intention of forgetting my sins. Ultimately, does the curse consist of the sins I have committed, or is it additional punishment imposed due to those sins? Even as the one being cursed, I have no idea. However, my hope is—"

To never hear another scream of pain again.

To never swing a bloodstained blade towards someone she liked.

"I will never compromise on this point, because—Even if the curse is not lifted, I have no intention of adding further to my sins. I am very clear on that. That's right. Perhaps looking back at the past is a mistake, but setting my sights on the future is definitely necessary. I believe in my feelings."

Sternly she looked up and continued:

"The place I want to stay is here. The person who acknowledged me for the very first time is here! I have decided where I shall reside, not as Fear-in-Cube but as Fear's first decision!"

She wanted to stay here. This was not only the stance taken by a cube but also the stance of the girl who received the name of Fear. Her first wish that came from the heart. As pure and innocent as a baby's first cry—was this desire.

And no baby would be silenced just because they were ordered to stop crying.

"I will be here. No matter who denounces me, despises me, feels anger towards me, or refuses to acknowledge me—or even curses me, nothing changes! So I will gladly accept your curse! Curse as much as you wish!"

These words made Peavey's face distort. As the impulse to laugh slowly flowed up to her throat, the instant it peaked—she screamed instead. Before Fear's eyes was neither a woman with noble airs nor a ghost who had abandoned all emotion, but a vicious demon with a twisted and ugly face!

"BIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIITCH! You have no right to speak like a human, so go and die! To dare imagine not suffering from a curse, I will not allow it! Die! Die! Die! Ah, how unbearable this is, so go and die!"

Peavey stepped forward impatiently. But then she turned around as if she remembered something and buried the axe blade deeply in Kirika's abdomen. Only then did she walk towards Fear.

Kirika's chest and abdomen were sliced open vertically, spurting blood like a fountain.

Her body also convulsed violently once.

Then stopped moving.

Fear screamed.

Part 8

Completely unexpected. This forbidden existence. Blood. Blood. Blood. Impulse. Terror. Desire. Trembling. Palpitation. Madness.

(Don't go mad. Kirika... Kirika! I won't go mad! Endure! Unforgivable! I'm going to slaughter this woman! Calm down! I have to kill her! I can't bear this, I'll save her once I defeat this woman, she definitely can be saved! I'm going to kill her! So stop going mad!)

She felt her consciousness eroding. The stress and discomfort of the moment was nauseating. Feeling herself weak at the waist, she watched as Peavey rushed towards her with axe in hand. She was going to be killed if she continued to stand there in shock!

Fear stumbled backwards. Manipulating the head of the iron maiden, she deflected the blade of the attacking axe, then she tried to distance herself—but tripped, falling on her bottom.

"Hahaha—! How unsightly! Stand up and fight!"

(Unsightliness is fine, not fighting is fine too!)

Fear closed her eyes as she endured. The smell of blood wafted into her nostrils. This too, needed to be endured.

(My mission is to not go mad—)

Because he believed in me.

He believed I will stay sane to the bitter end. That was why he came up with such a dangerous plan—he had suggested a plan that meant instant death for himself with any misstep.

That's right, I wish to change from the cube I've been up to this point.

I want to become an ordinary human.

I must believe so—

Fear saw that Peavey was just about to brush past the iron maiden that had stopped moving.

Now was her chance.

The world was tilted in her vision as if she were drunk. Fear lightly traced her fingers along the chain of cubes wrapped around her right hand, opening the iron maiden's cover. At least opening the cover was within her ability. Then—

From within the iron maiden that had remained shut until now, out jumped Haruaki.

"...!"

Peavey stared wide in surprise.

From her eyes it was apparent she finally understood why Fear did not use the iron maiden to fight. But it was too late.

At this extremely close distance, she was completely caught unprepared. She had already committed herself towards an attack pose.

The natural result from all of these elements was embodied by the word "unavoidable."

In that very instant, Haruaki rushed at Peavey with the Japanese sword in hand, accompanied with rage—

—Based on the discussion in Konoha's room, they had already decided what they were going to do. Deprive her of that axe. In order to achieve this goal, they needed to split up roles of offense and defense. Given the circumstances, the distribution of roles was decided automatically—the person who could swing a sword, but could not take any attacks, was only

suited to offense after all. But since the enemy was aware of this, she would target him first on sight. Hence there was only one solution.

A surprise attack from a location that the enemy could not attack even if they wanted to.

The only remaining challenge was finding such a place.

Fear felt a liberating sense of accomplishment. She no longer had to endure—just as she thought that to herself, the unnatural state she was desperately maintaining returned to normal—the spikes in the interior of the iron maiden she had been holding back shot out all at once.

(Seriously, coming up with this sort of plan... Indeed, the enemy cannot attack this place, plus the fact it was possible to launch an surprise attack at an extremely close distance without being detected, making it a perfect hiding place. Other than the fact that a single lapse in my concentration would result in a tragic death...!)

Naturally, maintaining a torture device in such a halfway state was something she had never tried or even imagined. But she did it. Because others placed their faith in her, she was able to do it.

Succeeding in avoiding killing Haruaki by accident, Fear felt relieved from the bottom of her heart.

She had done everything she could. Now she only needed to await the result.

Staring at the axe blade which continued to approach her head from above, that was the thought crossing her mind.

Part 9

"You... This... You—!"

Haruaki chopped at Peavey with all his strength. The sword itself also responded to him by offering its greatest speed. Shrouded in fury, Konoha made the most of the brief moment she had before she would faint from the sight of Kirika's blood.

Peavey's fist was already in motion as if about to smash Fear's head. With great precision, the black scabbard struck the fist, completely shattering the bones on the back of Peavey's hand—

"Guh—"

While she groaned in pain, the axe grip flew out of her hand at the same time.

Success! Damn her! Serves her right! Take that! Fear could feel violent and impure pleasure running amok inside her body. But only during this moment did she feel it was not bad at all. As long as she recalled the wicked deeds of this woman.

In that instant, the world appeared to be moving in slow motion.

Fear watched as the axe flew through the air as if progressing frame by frame. At the same time, she heard the woman's choppy cries.

The woman in the black dress, her arm dangling powerlessly. Saliva dripping from her mouth as she watched the end approach.

"—Ah, ah, ah, ah—"

But at this moment, the eyes which displayed intensely dark emotions transformed into the eyes of a beast.

Her groaning lips also began to roar like a wild beast.

"—Ngaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Then widening her mouth as if tearing it apart, she bit and held the grip of the flying axe between her teeth.

A number of her teeth broke and flew out. In spite of that, she continued to twist her neck, her torso half bent over, using a strange posture to wield the axe forcefully in her mouth with unbelievable speed and power—

Only one person was able to counter this berserk attack. Konoha murmured softly in apology, but it was not directed towards the woman.

(—I am sorry.)

In the next instant, this axe would surely bury itself into Fear—or Haruaki's body. Then there was no choice.

(Time to use the true Killing Counter—)

The true secret to the Killing Counter was not its destruction of weapons but the fact that it destroyed weapons and nothing else. In other words, it

was simply a high-level technique of mercy born from her taboo and avoidance of bloodshed.

Provided she discarded any notion of mercy to release her true self, Konoha was able to destroy weapons with pure power alone rather than technique. But given such a level of force, what might result indirectly in the wake? Injuring—or even killing the opponent would not be surprising.

(Killing someone and seeing the blood I spilled, perhaps I might be cursed again. However... There is someone I refuse to let her murder no matter what!)

Consequently, she deliberately ignored the taboo of murder she had maintained for past decades and centuries.

For the instant this thought existed, she imposed it upon the past demon she had abandoned—

In order to put into practice a sword's proper yet wrong purpose, its one and only original duty, the white blade slid out of its scabbard.

(—True-Kill Counter!!)

The art of drawing the sword with superlative divine speed. A light flashed across Dance Time wielded in the enemy's mouth.

And the result was—something inevitable, something fortunate, and something unlucky happened.

As the axe blade was split in half like tofu, the broken piece flew in the air and shattered inevitably.

Having deflected the axe blade that could have slashed his throat, Haruaki was fortunate that only a mere layer of cells was shaved off his ear.

As if guided by some unseen force, the flying shrapnel from the shattered axe blade flew straight into one of Peavey's eyes—

A scream.

Konoha accepted her scream and bleeding. Even though they were caused indirectly, they still counted as her crimes.

Desperately, she suppressed her inner self which reveled in joy and nostalgia.

"It's over... Right? ...Konoha, are you okay?"

"Uh... Yeah. I'm fine."

"What about Fear?"

"I'm also... Fine... But that's not the most important right now!"

"Right, Class Rep, hang on there! I'll call an ambulance straight away—"

Peavey lay shuddering on the ground as she listened to these voices while she endured the pain assaulting her eye. The urge to laugh was the reason why she shuddered. How utterly stupid, she thought. Sliced through the chest and abdomen like dissecting a frog, surely that girl must already be dead. For them to care about something like that and turn their attention away from her, they were truly stupid. Right now, the location where she lay happened to be where she had thrown her gun. God must truly be stupid to have prepared such a delicate coincidence in her favor.

She felt the hard and solid sensation beneath her belly. Even with her hand broken she was still able to move a finger at least. No one was paying attention to her. The boy was located closest to her. A gun was unable to destroy Wathes, but given the situation, she would satisfy herself with abusing the boy at least!

"Hee—Haha... Ahahahahahahahahahahaha!"

Dragging out the gun under her belly by hooking it with a finger, she stood up. The gun barrel swayed unsteadily, but she could not possibly miss at this distance. All she needed to do now was press the trigger—With great surprise, the boy and the rotten box looked back at her as they gathered around the girl's corpse. How meaningless.

"Gahahahha! Go and die!"

Fear-in-Cube was too late to get between them. Even if the sword wanted to control the boy's body to run, there was not enough time to raise blade to deflect the bullet.

The bullet flew towards the boy's skull. Brain matter and blood spattered all around. The Wathes screamed to Peavey's great delight. Serves you right, serves you right, serves you right, serves you right! Because you underestimated humans—

Her delusions forcibly interrupted, Peavey stared wide in surprise.

Why?

The girl lying on the ground—

Why was she staring back with her head inclined?

The gunshot failed to sound out. Something had wrapped itself around Peavey's right arm. It was that black leather belt.

(Ahhh... Ahhh... Ahhh... Ahhh! Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!)

Then all Peavey could see was something else. Something that brought a chill down her spine. She had previously mentioned to Mummy Maker that she hated long slender Wathes in particular. Especially when it was leather, black, and extending lengthwise, to her eyes—

It looked exactly like that which had caused her father to go mad, the frightful whip he used to abuse her.

Part 10

The girl who should have died suddenly stood up. From her right sleeve out extended a black belt. With similar movements like Mummy Maker's bandage, it extended forwards like a snake—wrapping itself around Peavey's arm.

"Class... Class Rep...?"

"Save your words for later! That woman still has a gun!"

But Peavey was clearly acting abnormally. She made no effort to struggle free and neither did she try to push the trigger by force—all she did was tremble as she stared at the belt that was wrapped around her arm. But there was no time to ponder why she was acting abnormally.

Kirika yelled out shrilly:

"—Fear-kun!"

In response to her shrill cry, a silver figure sprinted.

Condemning Peavey for her crimes, the girl shouted furiously:

"Mechanism No.8 crushing type, circular form: «Breaking Wheel of Francia», Curse Calling!"

The massive wheel crushed Peavey's arm that was being restrained by the black belt. Like various victims that had suffered the same torture, her arm was bent in an unbelievable direction.

"Yaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

Controlling the black belt, Kirika picked up the pistol that had fallen to the ground and tossed it into the distance.

Next, she aimed the front end of the black belt at Peavey herself who had fallen on her bottom. Her eyes staring wide, she focused her gaze on the waving belt before her, trembling as she shook her head:

"No... No... Don't, s-save me... Save me, help... Mummy Maker—Right, Mummy Maker, Mummy Maker, Mummy Maker! Hurry and save me—Ah. Ah. Ah...!"

Emotionally unstable, she muttered softly. Only halfway did she realize suddenly, her eyes unsteady:

"Ahhhhhhh! No good, I killed her, I already killed her, it's me! No more... Comrades... None? The weapon is also... Ahhhhh... Who will save me... Ahhh... This... Belt... Ahhhhhhhh!"

Shutting her eyes tightly, she rejected the swaying belt from her sight. Her behavior was akin to a child scared senseless by inescapable terror. Her body simply shook, trembling and swaying. Correct, as if unable to stop, like a swaying balancing toy—

"She must have some sort of mental trauma. Perhaps she deserves pity, but this works fine."

Kirika wrapped the belt around Peavey's neck then the leather gave off a sound of friction.

Simply rendering her unconscious—Kirika murmured as she watched Peavey's relaxed body.

"Hoo... Dear me. Seriously, somehow—absolutely ridiculous."

Haruaki observed Kirika once again. Her tone of voice and the frown on her face were the same as always. However.

The large volume of blood that gushed out earlier had disappeared at some point in time. As if demonstrating that Peavey's slice of the axe was

no illusion, Kirika's clothing completely slid off her body as a result of the massive cut and her subsequent motions.

But rather than pale white skin, what those clothes covered was—a black leather outfit instead. A highly revealing and tight-fitting bondage suit with metallic spikes in various places, trimming that emphasized the curvature of the breasts, and for some reason, a zipper at the crotch.

"...Don't keep staring... It's embarrassing."

"Umm... Ah... S-Sorry. But, ummm—Also, you definitely bled just now—"

"T-That's right! I saw it with my own eyes! That woman took an axe to slice open your belly!"

Haruaki and Fear spoke in confusion. Konoha simply spoke quietly:

"That—That outfit... Is a cursed tool, right?"

Kirika looked at the sword in Haruaki's hand, sighed, and nodded as if surrendering:

"Correct. This is the Wathe known as «Gimestorante's Love». A certain sadist cursed his female slaves: 'Why do these women die so easily? Surely it'd be much more fun if they continued to live even if their eyes were gouged out and their bellies sliced open!' At the same time, these slaves cursed their fate of abuse, thereby giving birth to this thing. Due to the curse, this outfit received a taboo ability—simply stated, whoever wears this cannot die from physical injuries. It is a Wathe that provides complete healing as an automatic effect."



"How could this be... To think there was a tool that could cause such an extraordinary phenomenon..."

"The more extraordinary the abilities granted, the more powerful the curse. Make no mistake, I do not wear this type of outfit because I like it. It started because I was forced to wear it—this outfit's curse is very simple, death occurs to whoever takes it off. Once it is worn, it must be worn for a lifetime."

"A lifetime?"

"A lifetime. Truly my tragedy."

Haruaki recalled his memories. Kirika wore thick clothing at all times. Even during PE lessons she never wore anything other than a full tracksuit. On rainy days she always held an umbrella—she was quite concerned about her clothing getting wet. Even when Konoha asked if she would like to take a bath, she refused. She was always worrying, probably fearing her secret might be carelessly revealed.

"Then there is this one called the «Tragic Black River». Its official name is much longer but that's not important. I'm forced to keep it on me for self-defense. It was originally a serial killer's favorite possession, but I have no wish of finding out how many lives this thing has taken."

As if condemning a serial killer with her gaze, Kirika waved the front end of the belt lightly.

"Ueno-san, please tell me... Who are you actually?"

Konoha's question received a sigh in response. Then as if organizing her thoughts, Kirika remained silent for a moment—

"Let me be clear, I am not your enemy. I only happened to be here today by coincidence. I apologize for hiding all sorts of things from you all, but I originally intended to keep my identity hidden and did not plan on getting involved with you—That said, I couldn't stand back and do nothing, seeing as this person from the Knights' Dominion had arrived."

Kirika shook her head lightly as she spoke:

"My comrades have been monitoring this woman from the moment she entered the country. We did not plan on taking any action originally, but starting with the day when I ran into Fear by coincidence... Things changed."

"Back then, you already knew what I was?"

"Yes. Rather, I already knew when you came to the school, but I had no choice but to play along. Regarding Fear's transformations of her Rubik's Cube, I told Yachi I 'saw something unbelievable' because according to my calculations, that was how an ordinary high school student should react without prior knowledge, and pretending to have seen nothing would be very unnatural—but following Yachi to the seaside after that was purely because I was worried."

That's right, Haruaki had told her "I will explain once everything settles," but to his great surprise, she accepted it readily. If she knew everything from the start, then there was nothing to be surprised about.

"Then I decided to take some minor actions. First, I stole the card Mummy Maker had given Yachi, then I tampered with the content and with my comrades' assistance, an opportunity was found to throw it into their stronghold—Since Mummy Maker was acting alone on her own accord, taking advantage of that could create conflict in their midst... That was what I thought. But it looks like the reaction provoked was excessive."

"So the card was lost because Class Rep stole it..."

"Yes... Furthermore, I also undertook yet another operation."

Kirika looked at Haruaki with wavering eyes as if she felt guilty.

"I originally planned to kidnap you. Sorry, that was me last night."

"...What? Why?"

"The person last night... You were the one whose arm I severed?"

"Yes, Fear-kun. As for why... It's... Because I felt that it was the only way to protect you in a safe place, Yachi. Clearly, those people from the Knights' Dominion were planning to kill those who stood in their way. But even if I asked you to hide, you probably wouldn't listen? Hence—I originally intended to take you to a safe place, even if it meant resorting to forceful measures. After Fear-kun and Konoha-kun defeated the people sent by the Knights, only then would I release you. After all, I couldn't expose my identity so I disguised myself as that Mummy Maker. Since her face was hidden and her weapon was similar to mine, it was a perfect coincidence."

Curling the black leather belt back to her right arm, she turned and faced Haruaki's group once more.

"Uh... It was for my sake?"

"Rather than for your sake, I felt that getting embroiled would be dangerous for you. But—It is true that I was being meddlesome. I reflected over it after I fled back home. At the time, you did not show fear and your eyes displayed determination. I also saw the way Fear-kun and Konoha-kun looked at me. Since you two were guarding Yachi so seriously, my actions were equivalent to trampling over your wishes. Completely tasteless. So I gave up... And now I would like to apologize for what happened that day."

"Hmm... I still don't quite get it, but I guess I should apologize for cutting off your arm?"

Fear frowned as she inclined her head in puzzlement. Kirika relaxed her expression slightly and said:

"Don't worry, because I'm wearing this thing, it was reattached instantly."

"I don't quite understand either... So in conclusion, what is your intention, Ueno-san?"

"R-Right... But since you're not an enemy, it's fine..."

"Goal... Eh? Well, I guess you could call it my personal intention? If you want to know what principle has driven my actions to this day..."

This time she truly smiled, the same way as she often did in the classroom.

"As the class representative, helping classmates is my duty, right? That's all."

"—Huh?" "What?" "Uh...?"

Three people. Three simultaneous questions. Kirika smiled wryly as she picked up her clothes, draped them over herself, tied up the cut open portion, and tried to cover up the highly exposing outfit beneath—but could not do so completely. Instead, she looked as if she was dressed wildly in punk rock style.

"Believe it or not, that is really the only reason. I... like you very much. Hmm, that's not right, umm... No. By liking I mean a normal relationship of classmates in school. Therefore—I wanted to help no matter what. Originally I only wanted to assist secretly, to push the situation towards a better direction."

"You didn't have to hide things, if only you told us from the start..."

"If that were possible, I'd be under a lot less stress, Yachi. I did mention a 'comrade' just now, right? I originally belonged to a certain organization. Not willingly, but this means my hands are tied in a certain sense. Although I asked a comrade to help me, it is a favor performed only at request and not without reward, similar to a debtor-creditor relationship. The organization's official stance is non-interference in the Knights' Dominion's affairs, hence my actions would be frowned upon... Were they to find out about this ridiculous incident, I'll probably get scolded."

"An organization you say? Could it be—"

Fear paled and gripped her Rubik's Cube which had returned to normal. Then Kirika picked up the unconscious Peavey as she spoke:

"Don't misunderstand, my organization's stance is completely different from the Frontline Gathering Knights' Dominion. That said, I find our own stance rather problematic as well... Seriously, it's not quite appropriate for a member like me to say this, but it is absolutely ridiculous..."

"What kind of stance is it...?"

"That of a 'research organization.' To 'understand' Wathes and cursed objects—this is the organization's only goal. By this point, there's no point in hiding things, so I'll be frank. The reason why I entered this school, other than to study like an ordinary person... Is partially because I was assigned a task of 'understanding.' In other words, my mission is to observe Yachi and Konoha-kun, to report on how a sword lives as it gradually lifts its curse and assimilate into human society. I simply report back that you pass your days happily, living more humanly than humans."

Perhaps unsure how to respond, Konoha remained silent.

"Fear-kun, if you were to stay here, surely you'll become a target for observation. Because not only to the Knights' Dominion, you are the focal point of attention for all organizations. I will find a way to take care of this woman, but inevitably someone else, perhaps even from a different organization, will show up."

"...Even so, I... Still want to... Stay here. I know this will cause a lot of trouble..."

Fear murmured with her head bowed. Haruaki forcefully rubbed her head.

"Don't say it's trouble. Stay if you want to stay, there will always be a way."

"That's right. Besides, where else could you go? What a headache of a child you are."

"Mmm... S-Stop treating me as a child, you two! I just... Just want to lift my curse, that's all."

"I heard what you said just now. Even though I don't know if it's right or wrong—I believe your intentions are very noble in any case."

"Wow, to think the Class Rep is praising someone...! How rare...!"

"A-Absolutely ridiculous! I do praise people sometimes! Yachi, you too... Since you decided to accept Fear, then stay true to your resolve, no matter what happens."

"Speaking of trouble, tons has already happened. By now, I've already grown used to it a long time ago."

Smiling, Kirika suddenly reached towards the ground, searching amongst the remains of the destroyed Dance Time.

"Class Rep, what are you looking for?"

"Since I deceived you, though this doesn't really count as an apology, I want to tell you all about something. The type of object called Indulgence Disks."

"Oh... That woman seems to have mentioned that, I remember—"

"A device for weakening curses."

The blade in Haruaki's hand shuddered. Fear also shook her silver hair as she looked up.

"I don't know the details but it's supposed to be a precious item. The Knights' Dominion tends to install it on equipment that causes severe side effects... Reportedly, it can form complicated systems in concert with the internal structure of tools that have the ability to take human form. I've also heard that Indulgence Disks have a tendency to attract one another. As for the actual truth, I have no idea. Also..."

From amongst the fragments, Kirika picked up a rectangular object that resembled a remote control. It was that object affixed to the axe's grip. Crushing the object in her hand, Kirika took out something from within and

tossed it to Fear. What Fear caught was something resembling a thin card, mere millimeters thick. Its pure black surface felt similar to steel in touch. Examining closely, one could discover, with great difficulty, faint etchings resembling geometric patterns.

"The Indulgence Disks seem to be related to Fear in some way. Anyway, you can have this."

"What is going on...? I have no idea?"

"Who knows. Like I said, I don't know any details."

Carrying Peavey on her back, Kirika then picked up various articles from the ground including the handgun and started to leave.

"—I'm going back now. Just as I suspected, I shouldn't do things I'm not used to doing."

"Class Rep! Wait a minute, I still have things to talk about...!"

"Yachi, I understand how you feel, but please be considerate of my position. Indeed, I am a member of an organization... But that does not define me personally... Being forced to wear this thing, forced to do things I don't like doing... I actually hoped you would never find out. I simply wanted to pass my days in school, being a nagging and totally uncute class representative, that would have been sufficient. My greatest wish... I hope you'll forget all this by tomorrow. Then I can simply report to the higher ups, all is well—That is the kind of life I want to lead, there is nothing more to my wish."

As he watched the image of her back as she halted her steps, the tone of Kirika's voice sounded somewhat lonely.

Haruaki could understand the sincerity and resignation in her words. Hence, his answer required no deliberation.

"If you say so, I'll forget it all... Back in school, I won't say anything about it. But let me ask a question. Why did you join that kind of organization unwillingly? And what is the organization called?"

Kirika looked back. Her glare was quite severe, quite melancholy—

"Lab Chief Yamimagari Pakuaki's Nation. The ridiculous miniature garden of a nation—one that my elder brother founded."

Then she started walking about, waving as she said:

"Don't skip school tomorrow, Yachi. Because I intend to win our sandwich duel!"

Epilogue

Part 1

In any case, night descended peacefully. Dinner was Chinese cuisine, but if one were to make a great concession, to comment with maximum possible mercy, benevolence and generosity... Yes... The taste was not too bad. But the problem was—

"You really need to control your appetite. So today, I'm only giving you this much."

Saying that, Haruaki rationed Fear's snack to three rice crackers only. But she still devoured them ravenously as usual, however—

"Uwah~ Unfair treatment! Abuse! Classroom disruption! Racial discrimination!"

"Where did you learn all those terms? It is an unavoidable fact, things decrease in number as you eat them, that is only natural. If you want, you should go out and buy one of those pockets that can conjure rice crackers endlessly!"

"...Where can I buy one?"

"The future."

Haruaki cleared the table as he spoke. Fear went "Hmph" in response and lay down, preparing to sleep.

"Sleeping immediately after eating. Be careful or else you'll turn into a cow~~"

"Why don't you tell that woman instead. No wait, she's already a cow, it'd be pointless. Hahaha."

"If she overhears this, you're going to be slaughtered..."

As she listened to Haruaki's footsteps as he walked to the kitchen, Fear suddenly felt an unfamiliar object beneath her. There was something in her pocket. Taking it out, she found the black card Kirika had given her. Maintaining her lying down posture, she placed the rectangular object before her as she gazed upon it.

"Indulgence Disk... That's what they called it? So how is it actually used?"

Frowning, Fear flapped the metallic card to fan wind against her face. As she stared blankly at the black object, somehow—a suddenly sense of discomfort filled her body. Instinctively, she stopped the movements of her hand.

"What... Is this feeling? I... What—"

Narrowing her eyes, she recalled the feeling in her chest. A vague and distant feeling that seemed to be telling her something. As hazy as a dream state—formless—a past sense of loss—how nostalgic—nostalgia?

That's right—she knew this thing.

Opening her eyes wide, Fear suddenly sat up. She knew. She had seen this before. Though she could not recall where or why, she definitely knew. This fact was deeply engraved somewhere in her memory.

"I can't recall any details... That's right, but for some reason, I know. I also know what needs to be done..."

Fear turned to look at the corridor. She could hear the sound of Haruaki washing the dishes in the kitchen.

She could not do it alone. In that case, she had no choice but to rely on that person...

"I-It can't be helped. That's right, there's no choice... Damn it."

Blushing as she got to her feet, Fear went to the kitchen. Leaning against the doorway, she deliberately avoided looking at Haruaki inside as she spoke:

"Hey... Haruaki. Is the bath ready?"

"It's already ready for you. Remember to put on the cover once you're done to prevent the bathwater in the tub from going cold."

"D-Don't nag so much! I already know!"

"Why are you suddenly angry...?"

"Uh... Umm, I have something... I need your help with. Wait until I'm done with my bath... Then come to my room for a bit."

She heard Haruaki turn off the tap.

"What is it? I'm done with the dishes, so we can do it now if you want."

"No... No no no, definitely no! At least wait until I've finished bathing, idiot! You got that!? Understood? You must remember to come!"

Blushing even further, Fear fled the kitchen with noisy footsteps.

"What on earth was that about...? Hey, Fear, I'm coming in, okay?"

Having knocked, he was just about to slide open the door when Fear's voice responded.

"Hmm... Yes."

"I'm coming in. What do you want to ask me to do..."

"Wah—Wait! Wait wait wait!"

"Wha... What is it now?"

"Umm... Mmm hmm. Before you come in, prepare yourself mentally. Rather—Y-You, don't get the wrong idea!"

"Get the wrong idea?"

"In other words—Hmm! B-Because it's you! Only because it's you, I am giving you special permission! I don't want to do this either... So embarrassing..."

"What?"

A strange noise was heard.

"You... In the beginning... You've already seen this... So..."

The stammering murmurs from the room made Haruaki's heart rate rise. Already seen this? What have I already seen? Something seen in the beginning—speaking of where he first discovered Fear, it was the kitchen? At that time, her appearance was—eeeh? It can't be... In other words, just now when she said she need to take a bath first at least, she meant—eeeh?

"I have a request... To make of you."

"W-Wait a minute! What are you planning?"

"I-It's very hard to explain. Just look... And you'll understand what I want you to do for me..."

"Just look and I'll understand? —B-But I'm allowed to look?"

"Only because it's you... I don't want anyone else to do it... Okay, once you're mentally prepared, come in."

"...Do I have a choice in this?"

"I'm not forcing you—Because this is a 'request.' Seriously, then I'll make this clear. Haruaki—"

Pausing in hesitation for a moment, Fear spoke again in a faint voice:

"You don't like... Touching my body?"

Haruaki's heart rate was reaching its limit. His mind went blank as if his brain was boiling.

"I... I'm coming in."

Aware that his mind had halted, Haruaki slid the door open with trembling hands—

Peering into the room, he found Fear in her most vulnerable state.

Then—they engaged in a secret act that only the two of them were privy to.

A fair amount of time after that...

Trembling, someone pressed against the slide door, eavesdropping on the situation in the room.

"Well then, I'm entering here..."

"Yee... Yahh! Don't touch with your finger! Dummy!"

"Sigh~~ Seriously. Then I'll finish things quicker."

"Yes—It's going in... Ah. You touched that..."

"This is really tight. Ooof!"

"Ah... Ah... Ah... Ah! Nn... Nnnnnn... Ahhhhh! I-It's in! Ahhhh... Ha... Hee... A-All of it... Is it all in?"

"No, only the front tip went in a little. Ready for another go?"

"Ah! —Hmm... Huaa... I-It's so tight!"

"It's already halfway in, just bear it for a while longer."

"Oww... Owwwwwww... Ahhh, no good, it's already... Full!"

"Does it hurt? Do you want me to stop?"

"Oooh... N-No need, continue. Continuing is okay, I... I'm fine... S-So!"

"Don't force yourself."

"I said it's okay... So it's okay... Hurry, see it through to the end... You can be a little forceful, just shove it in..."

"You're really leaving me no choice. Then it's going in all at once, you have to bear it—!"

"Ah... Hee... Aieee! I-It's coming... It's all... All in! Ahhh... Mmm..."

"Yes, it's in. It's done, Fear, you tried really hard."

"Mmm... Haruaki—"

The eavesdropper reached the end of her patience.

Listening outside the door, Konoha vigorously threw open the slide door with a great "Slam!"

"Y-You two! Truly... Truly... i-indecent! I won't allow it, I forbid this!"

"...Eh?"

Kneeling in front of a black cube, Haruaki looked up in surprise. His hand was reaching out towards a face of the cube which had been opened, exposing the complex machinery inside.

Her face red with embarrassment, Konoha gazed at the sight for several seconds.

As her glasses slid down lightly, Konoha and Haruaki spoke at the same time:

"...Eh?"

Part 2

A couple dozen of minutes prior to Konoha freezing from an unexpected sight—

"So it turns out to be something like this...!"

The instant he saw the vulnerable cube sitting in the center of the room, Haruaki collapsed on his knees upon the tatami.

"W-What? Why are you suddenly so dispirited?"

"No... Nothing, I'm just feeling exhausted. Just now I was definitely weird... What now? Isn't it a rare sight to have you in this form, what is this about?"

Haruaki patted the cube which was making sounds from who knows where as he knelt down before her.

"Wah! Don't touch so carelessly... Wait, never mind. Like I said, I am really unwilling to do this... But since you've already seen this form once already, I have a request for you."

"It has to be done in this form?"

"Yes. About the matter of the Indulgence Disk over there."

The black metallic card was found on the side without requiring any searching. Haruaki picked it up.

"I seem to... Recall something about it. It feels like... I remember something about it."

"Really? So, what needs to be done?"

Fear hesitated then spoke loudly as if she finally made a decision:

"L-Listen well, I am really embarrassed... Very embarrassed, you know! You have to be mindful of that while you act!"

"Right, so what do I have to do?"

"Mmm... Hmm. First... Turn me over, and make the current side on the base face that direction."

Although Haruaki had no idea what this was about, he did as told anyway. Grabbing Fear's corners on top, he mustered his strength and rotated the dense and heavy cube by one quarter of a revolution.

"Hey, be more careful with your movements!"

"Yes~ Yes~"

The base was now shifted to face sideways. Haruaki bent down to examine it but found it indistinguishable from the other faces of the cube. Just a black surface with tiny seams.

"Ooh... Ooooh... This feels as if someone was peeking underneath my skirt..."

"I thought you've never experienced peeking before?"

"I-I know what it's like, shut up! Hmph! Stop being so sluggish—Next, there should be a circular component on your upper right, push it in. Push the whole thing in."

"Yes."

"While keeping it depressed, pull out the exact center of the left side. The spot that looks like a 'C'—Yes, that's right."

Clang—accompanied by a faint sound, a portion of the cube sprung out. As seen before, the inside was filled with screws and gears in various combinations, forming a complicated inner structure.

"T-Then take that cylinder and spin it three revolutions towards the right... Wah, idiot, spin it slower! Seriously... Hmm... Haah... Next, slide the lower right portion out—Ah... Hoo..."

Haruaki followed Fear's instructions as he operated the cube's mechanisms step by step. Throughout the process, these instructions were mixed with sighs of unknown meaning. It really was quite a tough job.

"Then pull the lower cover up. Inside you should find a slender component, pushing it horizontally—"

"Yes~ Yes~"

"—Is strictly forbidden."

"Gah! A knife just flew out!"

Haruaki frantically withdrew his hand. The fright almost shaved a few years of his life.

"Listen carefully until I'm done! Moving it horizontally is very dangerous, so you have to move it vertically!"

"Stop wording things so misleadingly! I almost lost four fingers!"

"...Hmph. Serves you right for rudely playing with my body..."

"But it's you who asked me to do this..."

In any case, one of the cube's faces had been opened by Haruaki, exposing its complicated interior. The tedious steps made him rather exhausted, so he started to flex his fingers to take a break midway. At this time, Fear murmured and asked:

"Say—What is your opinion?"

"Opinion on what?"

"...What you see before you. Stained by bloodshed, unimaginably filthy. Even if unseen, it is filled with uncleanness—fully cursed. You... Would you feel disgusted?"

"Hmm—" Haruaki crossed his arms and spoke as if it were no big deal, sounding like he was recalling a memory:

"Speaking of which, isn't there a guy called Taizou? The really noisy guy in school. He really loves plastic models. I think you must have seen it, the Taizou zone he established behind the classroom, where he keeps several dozen—"

"...What does that have to do with anything? Is it related to me in some way?"

"I have no particular interest in plastic models... However, boys in general, there is a fraction of them that thinks that stuff like models and machinery are really cool—Yes. The more complicated, the more their eyes glow in admiration, thinking it is super cool. Boys are that kind of creature. Whether missiles, tanks... Or strange metal boxes, that is how they feel."

Fear fell silent. Probably not displeased silence—thought Haruaki.

"Then, what's the next step?"

"Hmm? Ah, right. N-Next is the final step. That's right, the final... Ahhh!"

Fear suddenly returned to a stammering state. What remained were the locked metal plates on top and on the two sides. Following her instructions, Haruaki operated and opened them like the chairs in a cinema—

"Ah... Ahhhh... Seen... It's seen... This place that no one has ever seen before..."

"This is—"

Neatly arranged inside were rows of slender slits. Four columns. Eight rows. Almost all of them were empty on first glance. Bringing his face close to examine carefully, Haruaki found two or three slits already occupied.

"Ah! Hmm... I can feel the breath from your nose, it tickles... D-Dummy! Hey, Haruaki!"

"Eh? Ah... Hmm, sorry. These... Could it really be..."

"That's right. Although I don't understand the meaning behind it, I sort of get it. I believe that disk was once kept here. So... Put it back inside."

"Is this really okay? I don't see any buttons for taking them out. Once it's in, it probably can't be taken out easily?"

"N-No problem. Probably. I just feel that it must be inserted no matter what... D-Do you understand? Which is why I can't do it alone. This is the deepest part of my body, and cannot be opened by my own will... Turning into this form, I can only request others to insert it. Okay, hurry and put it in! Just insert it anywhere! Simply being watched like this, is very embarrassing..."

"Sorry, I can't understand anything here except for your sense of embarrassment... Anyway, fine, I'm going to put it in then... Once it's inserted, who knows if your curse will be weakened?"

"No idea. But at least I don't have any ominous feeling, so it should be fine."

Since she said that, there was no choice, hence Haruaki picked up the black chip, and maintained his kneeling posture to approach Fear's slits. Then he arbitrarily picked a position to insert—

"...So that's what happened..."

After that, Fear suddenly lost her temper and said: "I have something I want to confirm! Hurry and reassemble everything then get out! Also, forget everything you saw just now!" Hence, Haruaki and Konoha returned to the living room to seek refuge and drink tea.

Konoha avoided looking at Haruaki directly and for some unknown reason, Haruaki found himself kneeling in traditional sitting posture. Ending the explanation of what happened to this point, Haruaki had no choice but to submit to the tense atmosphere and continued to speak respectfully:

"So, Konoha-san... Is it possible that... You're still... Angry...?"

"If it looks that way to you, then assume that is the case."

"No no no! But she was just a box, I haven't done anything to be ashamed of. Besides, didn't you show a 'Eh? I'm mistaken?' expression just now, Konoha-san?"

"Although it seemed fine in the first instant, on further thought, how could there not be a problem? Suppose I turned back into a sword. The sword is my body, there is no doubt about that. So if the sword is touched I will feel the sensation of being touched. But that is simply a sensation, and it doesn't mean it is precise enough to tell which part of the body was touched. However—when the most vital part of the original form is touched, it is equivalent to touching a human's most vital part. Do you understand?"

"Yes... Yes!"

Her extremely cold gaze seemed to pierce right through Haruaki, sending chills down his spine. Whenever Konoha drank tea as she insisted she was acting normally, that was when she was scariest.

"You touched it, right?"

"Touched it... I guess..."

"You manipulated it, right?"

"Manipulated... Maybe... I guess..."

After a moment—she shifted her gaze and murmured softly:

"...Pervert."

"I-I'm really sorry! But, umm... My mindset was really treating it as adjusting a box..."

The teacup was returned to the table with a crash. Haruaki cowered back and stopped talking. Konoha was so scary!

At this moment, from the direction of Fear's room, suddenly—

"Nooooooooooooooooooooo!"

A strange shrill cry was heard. Next came the sound of the sliding door pulled open with great force, followed by footsteps. Turned back into human, Fear rushed into the living room with great surprise on her face.

"Terrible! This is really terrible!"

"W-What happened? S-See, I knew it, because something strange was shoved inside—"

"That's precisely it! I knew this was the reason!"

Fear opened her eyes wide and cried out as if she could not believe it herself:

"The «Iron Maiden» form is no longer accessible!"

"Huh? You mean yourself? Or the weapon transformed from the Rubik's Cube?"

"Both! Basically, neither can take on that form anymore!"

"That means... The curse is weakened?"

Konoha put her anger towards Haruaki aside for now and asked.

"It doesn't feel that way. Simply the form is inaccessible."

"Then what does it mean?"

"Who knows—However, the reason stems from the insertion of the Indulgence Disk. No mistake about that. Originally, when I first awakened I had this strange feeling. I have thirty-two forms in total, but for some reason, two or three of them were unavailable. At first, I thought it was because I had slept for too long..."

"Before I inserted that card, there were a few embedded inside already."

"That's right. It is the result of that disk after all. Why the 'curse-weakening' mentioned by Kirika turned out to be like this, I have no idea, however—the limitation imposed on my torture tool functions is due to inserting that thing. Which is why the iron maiden is no longer usable... Hohoho... Haha..."

Suddenly, she crossed her arms tightly against her chest and started to laugh happily.

"So—to you, this counts as a good thing?"

"Of course! That's right, of course! This is great, isn't it?! One is clearly not enough, if more were inserted, more of those disks... Then all the forms will become inaccessible! Once that happens, even if my heart desired it, I won't be able to hurt anyone anymore! Then I no longer have to be scared of my past self, I no longer have to fear going mad!"

"Right. Then you don't need to worry about anything... And focus on gradually lifting your curse as a normal human being!"

"Certainly!"

"—Well then, where are the rest of the disks?"

"Ah."

Fear froze for a few seconds then sat down on seat cushion.

"Just to summarize what we've learned about the Indulgence Disks. They are things that can be inserted into you, or perhaps they were originally part of you, and once inserted, you become unable to use a particular ability. And..."

"...This thing was found on that axe. To me personally, I'm not sure if it has any meaning, but since others are using them, to other cursed tools—Perhaps the truth really is as Kirika described, the disks have the ability to suppress the effect of curses."

"In other words, the other disks are probably being used in other tools possessed by that organization called the Knights' Dominion? I remember that woman saying it was used on objects with particularly powerful curses."

"Yes, I see..."

Haruaki nodded in agreement.

"Summing up, let's bring up the next subject! Konoha, I didn't see you up until just now, what have you been doing?"

"Wait a minute, don't change the subject all on your own! We're talking about me right now! I am the subject of conversation!"

Fear slammed the table top forcefully. Haruaki scratched his head and said:

"But... Even if we know where they are, it won't be of much help. I don't know much about the Knights' Dominion, we have no idea where they're located, and neither do we know if they are coming back or not. There are too many uncertainties for us so there is no point in thinking too far ahead. In the end, let's just follow our original plan."

"...Hmm... Original plan... is that so?"

"Yes yes. Anyway, you have to learn common sense first. Once you are able to help around the house, then you can learn lots of things outside. This will take a lot of hard work, so be prepared."

Fear remained silent for a while but then she started tapping her fingertips noisily on the table as she threw a tantrum:

"...Where's my tea? And of course, rice crackers are required as snacks to go with tea!"

Despite saying that, she understood what she had to do and what she was able to do. Haruaki smiled wryly as he got up.

"Ah, since you're going to the kitchen, could you help me out along the way? Make a detour to the entryway."

"Help you out? Sure."

Agreeing to Konoha's request, Haruaki accompanied her to the entryway to find a large amount of luggage there.

"...What is this?"

"Eh? I didn't tell you? I'm going to move back into the main house for now. That was the answer to your question just now, I was packing my luggage earlier. So, I hope you can help me move them."

"No, wait a minute, I never heard anything about this? Why?"

"Yes! Due to the precedent of this incident, I believe it is better if I keep a closer eye on things for now. Living under the same roof, it would be easier to take action if anything happened."

"Intruder incidents shouldn't be that frequent, I think..."

"Also, leaving you two alone together, I would be most troubled if anything indecent happened."

Though she was smiling, it was a terrifying smile.

"If you refuse, Haruaki-kun, I will take that as a confession that you are planning to do something indecent, okay? I will refuse to speak to someone so perverted ever again."

Hearing the threatening tone in her voice, Haruaki slumped his shoulders dejectedly.

"Like I said, just now was because she requested, plus she was even in cube form, so there's nothing indecent... Whatever, after all, there's no disadvantage anyway. You used to live here so you should know your way around. That room over there is free, so you can use that one."

"Got it. Hehe, it's been so long since I lived here. Since I will be in your care here, let me help you with the cooking as much as possible!"

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaat!"

Without them noticing, Fear had suddenly appeared behind them. She probably ran out of patience and charged into the kitchen to commit robbery? Held in her hand was the bag of rice crackers.

"Cow Tits here is going to live in the same house? I never heard about this!"

"By the way, the room seems to be next to yours. Pleased to meet you too."

"I-I don't approve of this!"

"Eh, why?"

"That is because... Umm... Y-You, simply looking at that very heavy body part makes me so mad! Shameless! And even sleeping in the room next

door? That is fundamentally a problem! Every time you turn in your sleep, you'll surely make noise that disrupts my sleep!"

"Ahaha, hear that, Haruaki-kun? This child is truly amusing... May I give her a sound beating?"

"You're treating me as a child again!"

"How troubling, wait until it's my turn to cook, perhaps I'll accidentally make one children's meal less?"

"To think you'd go for starvation tactics, completely despicable...! Hmph! If I actually ate your meaty cuisine, surely I'd grow really fat! Just like a certain someone, growing meat in useless places! Ha, it's just as well!"

"What... How dare you make up new descriptions to insult me!"

"...Uh... By the way! I have to go check the mailbox, hahaha!"

Using this contrived excuse, Haruaki escaped the scene before he could be embroiled into the conflict. While listening to the noisy dispute behind him, Haruaki quietly made his way outside. Neither of the girls noticed.

Slowly, he opened the mailbox next to the main gate. Amongst pornographic flyers and junk mail, he found a single letter delivered via air mail—sent from his father.

"!"

This was the first time Haruaki received any communication from his father ever since he sent Fear here on his own accord. Haruaki opened the letter immediately in a hurry. There were too many things he did not understand at this point in time. You have explain everything in detail, old man—Thinking that to himself, Haruaki used the light at the entrance for illumination. The content of the letter was rather brief:

'It will take me a while before I can come home. Also, I think quite a few disasters might have happened during daytime, so I gave the superintendent a call. You can save your thank you hug until I get back!"

"No, I completely don't understand what's the meaning of this! As if I'd feel thankful at all!"

Turning the letter over, he waved it to check for any hidden messages. At this time, one of the letters he was holding under his arm fell to the ground.

He had failed to notice the letter until now, but the words on the envelope were very familiar to Haruaki. Seeing the words, "Taishyuu Private High School," the name of the school he was studying at, Haruaki had an ominous premonition.

Opening the bulging envelope, he found several folded documents inside. He did not spend the effort to read the fine print, however—one of them was written in large print, realizing his ominous premonition in the worst manner possible.

The first thing he saw was a name written in katakana—"Fear," followed by an arbitrarily chosen family name.

The next line after that was—Authorization of the above-named student's enrollment.

"My old man is such an idiot... Look at what he's done!"

Haruaki slouched dejectedly and gave a deep sigh.

Afterword

The following scene happened at the MW Editorial Department.

Me: "So, the question is the book's title... How about ●●? (trembling)"

Sucks like hell! How could that kind of title sell at all, you ×××! —Hearing the inner thoughts of the editor, the poor sacrificial lamb, namely, me, hastily brought up the second suggestion.

Me: "What about ■■..."

Inner thoughts: By the way, I don't get the meaning of your existence either, hoho.

The merciless thoughts made me almost wet myself. But even on the verge of tears, I was not going to give up! Now for the third and final suggestion!

Me: "Sniff sniff... Well then, I gave it some thought yesterday, yeah, how about C raised to the third power? Since it's the third power, that's taking the cube. Furthermore, C has a triple meaning..."

Me: "(Another problem?) W-What is it?"

Me: "..."

After going through the above process, this book came into existence. Hello dear readers, I am Minase Hazuki. Presenting to you a new series completely unrelated to a cake shop—«C³ - C-Cubed». By now, who cares if the name coincides or not~? Besides, I don't expect there to be many single men, twenty-eight years in age, to be staying at the forefront of popular trends and being knowledgeable in cake shops. Hence, I am not responsible... Probably.

Okay, I know there exist readers who start reading from the afterword, so let me make some simple introductions. This work's main elements are: girls / cursed tools / cohabitation... etc, and secondary elements include comedic parts / serious parts / battle parts / mild ecchi / mild guro / transformations / Japanese sword / large boobs / flat chests / smooth etc.

Also, my goal is to allow readers to enjoy this story, whether they are fans of White Minase's debut work «結界師のワ—ガ» during his early innocence, or fans of uncontrolled Black Minase's «ぼくと魔女式アポカリプス» inspired by his many experiences, or simply readers new to my works. In other words, this book combines White Minase and Black Minase to give gray... Well, a gray impression doesn't sound too good... Let's call it Silver Minase instead. I don't really know what I'm trying to say here, but since the heroine happens to be silver-haired, it's all good.

In addition, this story only includes very few elements related to White Minase's works, but anyway, these are just extras for fun. Those who catch them, please laugh secretly and keep them to yourself. That person will not be participating in the future plot, and neither will any youkai or similar be appearing in the story. In the same way, Shakespeare and Tokugawa Ieyasu were born in the same time period, but never lived in the same world.

Finally, let me offer some acknowledgements.

Let me thank my most dutiful editor, Kawamoto-sama, who has been extremely patient despite me being slow on the uptake. I will try my best not to let your inner thoughts come true in reality.

Illustrator-sama, thank you for your illustrations! Truly, they are so cute I almost died from moe! I'll be in your care from now on.

Also, to everyone who participated in this work, as well as all the readers who picked up this book, I am truly grateful to you all.

Well then, let's wrap things up at this point. Let's hope everyone can continue supporting my works for many years to come.

Minase Hazuki

References

1. ↑ Tatami: Tatami Mats are a type of flooring used in Japan made of soft straw. The mats are made at a standard size of 90cm by 180cm, and the mats are easily countable, so they are often used to describe the size of a room.
2. ↑ Dry curry: typical Japanese curry consists of a curry stew served on plain rice. On the other hand, dry curry is less liquid and is basically curry-flavored fried rice. Haruaki is basically criticizing Fear for mixing her curry so thoroughly with the rice.

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